

LEWIS AND CLARK WITH PALM PILOTS

TO PRODUCE A COMPREHENSIVE conservation strategy, FWP relied heavily on the Montana Natural Heritage Program (MTNHP).

Based in Helena, the heritage program is a sort of modern-day Corps of Discovery. Two centuries ago, Lewis and Clark crisscrossed the region looking for and recording the locations of new plant and animal species. Today MTNHP ecologists, botanists, and zoologists do the same. But instead of inking the information on parchment and sending it to Washington, D.C., heritage program staff members enter the data into computers and then provide detailed, multilayered maps on the Internet to the public.

Begun in the mid-1980s, the MTNHP gathers information on Montana native plants, wildlife, and habitats, focusing most on those species in greatest need of conservation. It then compiles databases and maps of that information for use by public agencies, private business, community groups, and individual citizens.

"Sometimes a plant or animal is considered 'rare' only because there's a lack of information showing that in fact it's not," says Sue Crispin, MTNHP director. As an example, she tells of an uncommon thistle found in 2005 in the Helena National Forest. The discovery put the skids on a planned land exchange between the U.S. Forest Service and a private landowner. "But then our botanist identified several new populations of



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the long-styled thistle elsewhere in Montana, showing that, overall, its status is secure, and clearing the way for the exchange to go forward," she says. "It was a win-win situation for all involved—including the plant."

Highway departments and mining and timber companies use the heritage program's maps to see if planned developments will harm sensitive wildlife, such as mountain plovers or long-billed curlews. "Having this information in the planning stages of projects helps avoid costly delays and conflicts, and lessens damage to wildlife and habitat," Crispin says.

The MTNHP is located at the State Library in Helena and is part of the library's Natural Resource Information System. Each state, as well as many Canadian provinces and Latin American countries, has a natural heritage program. They all pool data to help conserve resources that move across state and international boundaries, such as grizzly bears and migrating neo-tropical warblers.

For more information, visit the natural heritage program website at: mtnhp.org.



JACQUE POOLLE

RARE? After a MTNHP botanist found that the long-styled thistle (above) was more common than thought, a land swap was able to proceed.