



Dear Friends,

This year marks the fifteenth anniversary of the Malpai Borderlands Group and, coincidentally, also the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of renowned conservationist Aldo Leopold to the Southwest. Mary and I recently had the honor and the pleasure of having lunch with Leopold's daughter Nina, who is 92 years young, in her home near Baraboo, Wisconsin. Like her father and her three siblings, Nina has devoted her life to conservation. Therefore, it was especially gratifying to hear her say that the work of the Malpai Borderlands Group is exactly the kind of conservation that her father had in mind and she wishes there were more groups like Malpai in existence. What a compliment!

In our tenth anniversary newsletter, I listed our accomplishments to date, which included: saving land from development, our work with fire, our research and monitoring efforts, the watershed work we are engaged in, the endangered species issues we've tackled, and our support for ranchers on their individual ranches; whether it be water development, wildlife-friendly fencing or brush control. As you will read in this newsletter, all that good work continues on. The challenges continue as well. Ranching remains a tough way to make a living. The border issues seem as intractable as ever. Development has temporarily stalled due to the recession, but the sources for money to purchase

conservation easements have nearly disappeared as well (we hope temporarily).

Just as this has been a challenging year to ranch in the borderlands (the rains have been spotty and late in coming), it's also been a challenging year for our nonprofit conservation group. One effect of the bad economy has been a reduction in support from environmental foundations whose grants help to fund our work. More than ever, we depend on you, our individual supporters, to keep things going. This coming year looks to be more challenging than any we have faced since the very first year of our existence. That is why your support is critical. To save money, we have combined our newsletter with our Annual Appeal, so you will find an envelope attached. We thank you in advance for your contribution in any amount you can give and we always appreciate your good wishes. With your help, we hope to be able to look back on 2010 with the same sense of accomplishment that we feel for the work done this year.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bill McDonald". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bill McDonald  
Executive Director and Member of the Board

#### **MALPAI GOAL STATEMENT**

*Our goal is to restore and maintain the natural processes that create and protect a healthy, unfragmented landscape to support a diverse, flourishing community of human, plant and animal life in our borderlands region. Together, we will accomplish this by working to encourage profitable ranching and other traditional livelihoods which will sustain the open space nature of our land for generations to come.*

## THE RANCHER & THE RABBIT

### *Myles Traphagen*

What do ranchers and White-sided jackrabbits have in common? Turns out, quite a lot. Both like a good cover of nutritious perennial grasses, and neither does well when shrubs invade the grasslands. The White-sided jackrabbit, like many animals in our Borderlands, is at the northernmost edge of its range. The only place it is found in the U.S. is the lower Animas Valley - that part of the valley that takes your breath away when you come up out of Foster Draw.

On July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2009 the US Fish & Wildlife Service issued a “90 Day Petition Finding and Initiation of Status and Critical Habitat Review” in response to a petition submitted by the Wild Earth Guardians for listing the White-sided Jackrabbit (*Lepus callotis*) as an endangered species.

The finding was published in the Federal Register (Vol. 74 No. 139, pp. 36152-36158). This finding is likely to initiate a 12 month review that will examine the status of the species in greater detail. In the petition the Wild Earth Guardians cite current grazing practices and fire suppression as a threat to the hare. They apparently came to this conclusion without visiting our area. Information from studies the Malpai Group has supported indicate that historic declines in the jackrabbit population probably have a different explanation.

The species evolved with heavy grazers in the blue grama/buffalograss shortgrass prairie that is unique to the Animas Valley in our region, but more common further south in the high grassland valleys of Chihuahua and Durango, which is the heart of its range. The places where the jackrabbit survives are some of the most heavily grazed parts of the Chihuahuan grassland region. Strange that the Wild Earth Guardians cite grazing as a threat to the species, when its very survival appears to be due to grazing! The noted naturalist Edgar Mearns discovered the hare in 1892 on McKinney Flats in the west fork of the Playas Valley, but since 1990 there have been no sightings there. It appears to be becoming scarcer due to a phenomenon that we all seem to be affected by -

woody shrub invasion. It has been well documented that shrub cover in our grasslands has increased substantially over the last century or so. Fortunately, the many long term monitoring and research projects like the McKinney Flats Fire & Grazing Project, Diamond A Range Monitoring Program and the repeat photography of the Border monuments by Dr. Ray Turner have become very useful in understanding how our unique ecosystem works and how the White-sided Jackrabbit fits into the complex processes of fire, grazing and weather.



Photo credit: USFWS

As luck would have it, the 90 Day Finding was published one week prior to the deadline for the annual New Mexico Department of Game & Fish Share with Wildlife Program, and a grant proposal was submitted just in the nick of time. On September 8, 2009 the Department awarded a grant to study the current status of *Lepus callotis*. A big

thanks goes out to them! Wish us luck in finding rabbits.

## AWARDS

This year we received the Maverick Prize - an annual award made by the Autry National Center to recognize work that challenges conventional wisdom and prompts truly novel thinking about the past, present, and future of the American West. The Autry National Center is dedicated to exploring the stories and interactions of cultures and peoples, and their impact on the complex, evolving history of the American West. We feel truly honored to have our work recognized by this organization.

## CONSERVATION ON THE CLOUDT RANCH

### *Bill McDonald*

Over the past twelve months, the Malpai Borderlands Group has worked with the Cloudt family to complete two important conservation projects on their ranch. The first, completed in December, 2008, was a conservation easement to permanently protect the 9,500 acres of private land on the ranch from ever being subdivided and developed.

The Cloudt Ranch sits south of Rodeo, New Mexico in the San Simon Valley and the Peloncillo

Mountains. The New Mexico/Arizona state line runs through the middle of the ranch. The family has worked hard over the years to improve and maintain the grasslands of the ranch. At the same time, they have watched in dismay as much of the nearby land has been sold for subdivision. With enough water to support irrigation farming and with property frontage along highway 80, the Cloudt Ranch could have become a subdivision as well. But the family had other ideas. They originally approached the Malpai Group about an easement in 2002, but had to wait until an estate agreement with the Internal Revenue Service expired before they could convey a conservation easement. The agreement expired in November of 2008, and one month later the conservation easement was signed and the ranch became protected in perpetuity.

Subsequent to the easement, the Cloudt family and the Malpai Borderlands Group teamed up to replace over 8 miles of old, sagging and hazardous barbed wire fence that bounded the ranch on one side. The new fence is all steel, so fire doesn't destroy it, and it's wildlife-friendly, with an elevated and smooth bottom wire and adequate spacing between the two top wires so that animals can't get entangled in it. The ranch has habitat for many species of wildlife, including pronghorn, deer, and Desert Bighorn. These, in particular, will benefit from the new, safer fence.

## 2009 AGENCY MEETING

We had a lively exchange of information about current issues, opportunities for cooperation, and new planning initiatives at our annual Agency Meeting, which we hold in April every year. This is one of the few occasions when members of all the state, federal and local agencies we work with in Arizona and New Mexico get together to compare notes.

One of the tragic events of the year was the death of the jaguar known as Macho B, which was photographed many times over the last few years in the Altar Valley area southwest of Tucson. Steve Spangle, Arizona state supervisor for USFWS, gave a thorough account of the capture and radio-collaring of Macho B, including events that led to the decision to subsequently euthanize the animal due to irreversible renal failure. We hope that this experience will improve our chances to learn more from the next jaguar to wander into the United States.

We heard about a number of opportunities for cooperative projects. Kris Randall encouraged us to participate in the Partners in Wildlife program of the USFWS for habitat improvement. Steve Barker, from the NRCS in AZ, updated us on how the new Farm Bill programs can help with grassland management. Doug Boykin, New Mexico State Forestry, and Brian Lauber, Arizona State Forestry, gave an overview of a grant application for prescribed burning that has been submitted for the Malpai Borderlands in both Arizona and New Mexico.

Fire management policy continues to be an evolving issue with the agencies. Bill Childress, Las Cruces District Manager for BLM, explained that agencies are being encouraged to follow national fire policy and use "least cost" suppression tactics whenever possible. In determining how to respond to a fire, agencies can consider whether or not a fire is likely to have beneficial effects on the landscape, regardless of the source of ignition. This approach is consistent with the Group's goal of letting fire play a more natural role in grassland restoration.

Wind power will be a topic of increasing importance in our area in the future, as the wide open, windy spaces of the West are seen more and more as a source of energy. Bud Starnes, New Mexico Department of Agriculture, noted that they have a wind energy and solar energy specialist on staff to assist ranchers and other landowners who may be confronted with the need to deal with siting issues and potential land use conflicts.

## A RECORD-BREAKING FIRE YEAR

*Sam Smith*



This has been a fire year for the record books for several reasons, and it will always be especially memorable for me. I got up one morning in June to see a new column of smoke to the south, coming from a lightning strike just across the border in Sonora. I loaded the four-wheeler in my truck and ran down to see just how far it was from the line. After reassuring myself that it would not be a problem, I turned around to head back to the truck. I saw a column of smoke, and for a moment was confused that I had made a full circle and was heading south again. Then I realized it was a second fire, which was headed straight for my truck! I raced the fire back to the truck, and lost. When

## REPORT FROM THE MBG-NRCS PROJECT COORDINATOR

*Don Decker*

I got there the truck was sitting in the middle of a blackened patch, and by some miracle was not burned up! But the morning was just warming up. The fire now had a good breeze behind it, and was heading due east toward my house. So I jumped in the truck and raced the fire back to my house. Fortunately, this time I won and was able to prepare a fire break just ahead of the fire. This became the Pascoe fire, and quickly grew into the largest single natural fire in the recent history of the Malpai region.

Recorded fire history for the Malpai region goes back 20 years with an average of over 20,000 acres per year burned and the average start date for fire season usually being sometime in May. The 2009 season has been unusual with the first fires starting at the beginning of February and continuing into August with a total of approximately 125,000 acres burned north of the US-Mexico border and another estimated 60,000 burned just to the south in Mexico. This is twice the previous maximum burned acreage for one season. One important message from this is that even though our grasslands just came through a 100-year scale drought, they have tremendous resilience to recover enough to carry fire on this scale after only two years of good rain.

Interestingly, most of the fires in the Malpai region occurred in the Peloncillo Mountains. These fires kept the Coronado Forest Service crews very busy during an extended fire season. In the middle of this busy fire season, the Forest Service was able to conduct the 2500 acre Cloverdale prescribed burn in May with great success. They deserve big congratulations for their efforts. They achieved incredible fire effects and the burn area helped with timing and management of the 90,000-plus acre Pascoe fire that occurred in mid-June. New Mexico State Forestry deserves a lot of credit for their management of this large fire, which was driven by gusty winds. Fortunately the burned areas received good rains in late June to bring the grass up, before the disappointing months of July and August. Without the rains after the fire this story might have been much worse. Early September has been good with rains returning to most areas helping to get the growing season going again. With any luck the rains will continue into the fall and winter giving everyone in the region good feed and fuel for next year. Parting note; when you go to see about a fire, be careful where you park!

It has been a busy but rewarding year working with the Malpai Borderlands Group and their partners on many kinds of conservation efforts, from fence repair and erosion management to grassland restoration and watershed research. A new effort this year has been developing a system for tracking conservation projects in the Malpai Borderlands for the Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP). One of the provisions in the new Malpai HCP is to document conservation practices that the Group conducts, most of which are cooperative efforts with NRCS. With the help of other advisors, a small working group was formed whose goal is to make sure that the provisions of the HCP are being followed. This group helped to create a spreadsheet which will be updated with information about the location and size of all conservation activities that we do, broken down by watershed and type of practice. This will make up a portion of the yearly HCP report that the Group submits to USFWS.

It has been a treat to continue working on research projects run by Dr. Jerry Gottfried of the USFS Rocky Mountain Research Station. These projects include study of the effect of fire on watershed function at the Cascabel Experimental Watershed and grassland restoration research on the three large-scale plots. These projects are creating an important database of scientifically derived results which will help land managers make informed decisions about specific conservation practices like prescribed burning and rangeland mechanical treatment and seeding.



Photo: Sam Smith

Our grassland restoration work has included helping the Department of Homeland Security restore sites that were disturbed

during the installation of the international border barriers by developing native grass and shrub seeding mix recommendations for the restoration work. Malpai Group cost-share projects have also included

replacement of old boundary fences which were hazardous to wildlife, water developments which have important livestock management and wildlife values and brush control projects to restore historic grasslands. I was able to help eight Malpai area ranchers apply for NRCS Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) contracts. Four of these applications were approved and now the contracts represent over \$184,000 worth of conservation practices.

We made a lot of progress this year on the erosion management project designed by Van Clothier of Stream Dynamics. I assisted the Group to secure support from Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) to construct hundreds of loose rock structures in small drainages that flow towards the San Bernardino Wildlife Refuge across three different ranches. It has been an inspiration to work with outstanding ranchers and other Malpai Group cooperators on projects that benefit ranch productivity as well as wildlife habitat and the endangered fish downstream on the Refuge.

#### **NEW 2009 MBG BOARD MEMBERS:**

**Billy Darnell** was raised on his family's ranches in the Chiricahua Mountains of Arizona and in the Animas Valley of New Mexico. He attended grade school in Apache, Arizona and high school in Animas, New Mexico. Billy roped professionally as a member of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys' Association, and served three terms as Hidalgo County Sheriff. He is still ranching in New Mexico and also guides hunts in Sonora, Mexico. Billy is number four of six generations of ranchers in the Animas Valley.

**Sadie Hadley** was raised in Guadalupe Canyon in the Peloncillo Mountains on her family ranch where she developed a strong appreciation for both the landscapes and ranching cultures straddling the US-Mexico border. She presently co-manages Guadalupe Ranch, serves on the board of Sky Island Alliance, and participates in the work of the Animas Foundation. Sadie is committed to protecting both the natural and cultural heritage of this region.

Board Member Emeritus **Drum Hadley** is a long time area rancher and the individual most responsible for the founding of the Malpai Borderlands Group. Drum has served on the MBG Board of Directors since the Malpai Group's beginning and is also a

founding board member of the Animas Foundation. He is a published poet and has generously used his talents in support of the Malpai Group's efforts.

#### **DONATIONS ON THE WEBSITE**

We heard from several of our supporters that they would like to be able to make donations via their credit card. The Malpai Borderlands Group can now accept donations on our website at:

*[www.malpaiborderlandsgroup.org](http://www.malpaiborderlandsgroup.org)*

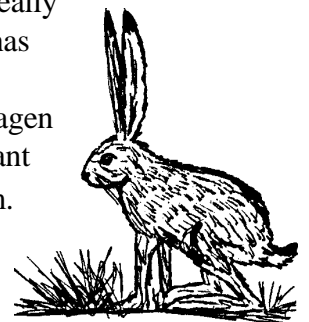
On the website, go to the home page and scroll down to the lower left side of the page, where you can use the PayPal button to make a donation by credit card.

#### **HABITAT CONSERVATION PLAN PROGRESS**

##### ***Peter Warren***

It has been one year since we signed the multi-species Habitat Conservation Plan with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This year has been devoted to learning how best to manage the planning and tracking of our projects to follow the HCP guidelines, as Don Decker mentioned. However, we also need to keep track of the location and size of all fires, not just prescribed burns but wildfires as well, to avoid excessive impacts to sensitive watersheds. Sam Smith has been invaluable in organizing digital maps for the Malpai area. One thing is certain: we are much better organized to keep track of the many projects the Group is involved with than we were last year!

The Habitat Conservation Plan involves maintaining up-to-date information about the species that are covered by the Plan as well as the Group's management actions. For example, the white-sided jackrabbit has been petitioned for listing as endangered. We recognized that the jackrabbit was extremely rare and declining when we developed the HCP with the Fish and Wildlife Service so we included it in the Plan. This means that even if the jackrabbit is listed in the future, it won't effect Malpai activities because the HCP guidelines already cover it. However, more information is needed to really understand why the jackrabbit has declined in recent years, so the status survey that Myles Traphagen is conducting will be an important part of the overall HCP program.



**FOUNDATION SUPPORTERS**

These foundations are among those that have helped us since Malpai Borderlands Group began:

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- Alice Busch Gronewaldt Foundation
- Animas Foundation
- Anonymous Charitable Trusts and Foundations
- Arizona Cattlegrowers' Foundation
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- Public Lands Council
- Stocker Foundation
- Thaw Charitable Trust
- Tides Foundation
- Turner Foundation
- Wallace Research Foundation
- Wilburforce Foundation
- Wolf Creek Foundation

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The Malpai Borderlands Group sincerely appreciates the support received from all of the Foundations through the years.

**ANNUAL APPEAL**

Our Annual Appeal is very important to cover expenses for running the office. The donations support work done by staff to administer our projects. We are very grateful for all the people that help us with these donations. THANK YOU!!

**COOPERATORS**

**PRIVATE SECTOR:**

Cooperating ranchers and landowners in Arizona, New Mexico, and Mexico.

**PUBLIC SECTOR:**

**\*U.S. Department of Agriculture:**

- ~Agriculture Research Service
- ~Forest Service:
  - Coronado National Forest
  - Rocky Mountain Research Station
- ~Natural Resource Conservation Service
- ~Jornada Experimental Range, Agricultural Research Service, USDA

**\*U.S. Department of Interior:**

- ~Bureau of Land Management,
  - Las Cruces and Gila Districts
- ~Fish and Wildlife Service

**\*U.S. Department of Homeland Security:**

- ~Border Patrol - Customs

**\*Conservation Districts:**

- ~Whitewater Draw Natural Resource Conservation District
- ~Hidalgo Soil and Water Conservation District

**\*University of Arizona's Desert Laboratory**

**\*University of New Mexico**

**\*Arizona State University**

**\*New Mexico State University**

**\*New Mexico Department of Game and Fish**

**\*Arizona Game and Fish Department**

**NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS**

- \* The Animas Foundation
- \* The Nature Conservancy
- \* Cuenca Los Ojos

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