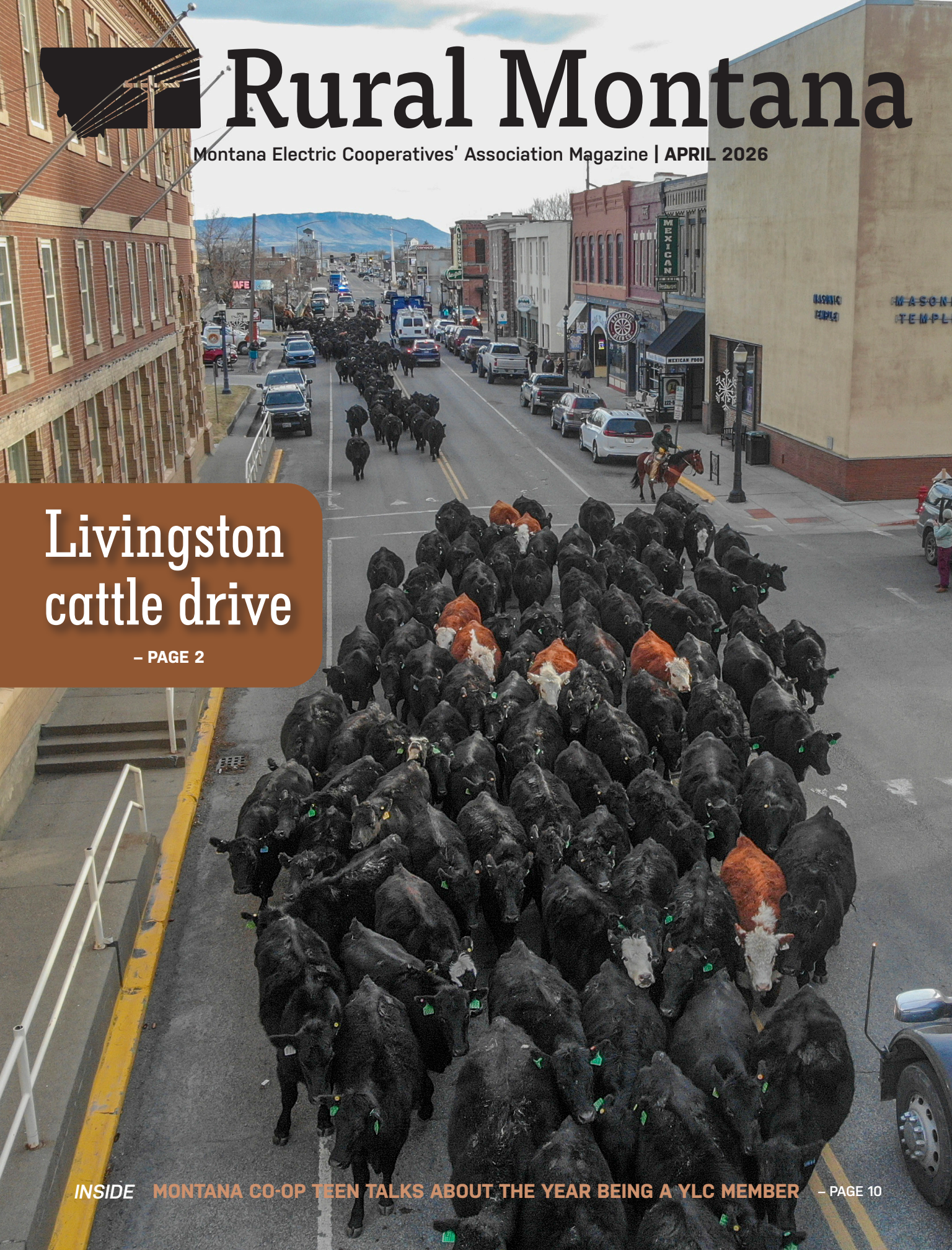




Rural Montana

Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association Magazine | APRIL 2026



Livingston cattle drive

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Co-op rancher takes cows through Livingston



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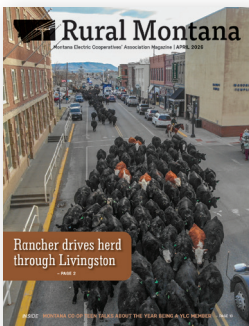
Year as YLC

Youth leader recalls experiences in D.C., Nashville



COVER

About our cover: Jesson Rock N Ranch cattle make their way down Park Street in Livingston. | PHOTO BY RYAN HALL



Rural Montana

April 2026

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RURAL MONTANA (ISSN0199-6401)

Mission Statement: To be the premier source of trustworthy information related to Montana's electric cooperatives — highlighting their members, the vital role co-ops have in their communities, and their commitment to delivering safe, reliable and affordable electricity. Vol. 72 | No. 4

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SUBSCRIPTIONS | \$10 per year.

POSTMASTER | Published monthly by Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association, 501 Bay Drive, Great Falls, Montana. Periodicals postage paid at Great Falls, Montana, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster send address corrections to P.O. Box 3469, Great Falls, MT 59403.

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THE CO-OP RESOLUTIONS PROCESS: Make your voice count

MARK LAMBRECHT, CEO of Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association



ONE of the great things about being a member of an electric cooperative is that you have a voice in how the state and national co-op organizations operate. One way that happens is through the cooperative resolutions process.

Last month, representatives from your co-op and the Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association (MECA) traveled to Nashville for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) annual meeting. At that meeting, co-op leaders from across the country reviewed and adopted dozens of resolutions submitted by electric cooperatives.


These resolutions help guide the work of MECA and NRECA. They provide direction on important issues such as legislative and regulatory advocacy, cooperative operations and community support. For example, some resolutions encourage federal agencies to maintain preference for co-ops for power purchases and transmission access. Others seek to protect availability of hydropower, support tax policies that benefit cooperative financing organizations, and promote youth programs and scholarships.

The resolutions process starts with co-op members. If you have an idea for a resolution, you can share it with your local co-op board. If the board supports the idea, it can be brought forward to the MECA Resolutions Committee, which reviews proposals at its annual

fall meeting before they're approved by the members present at the meeting.

There's a similar path for national resolutions. Ideas from members move from local co-op boards to MECA and then on to NRECA, where they are first reviewed at regional meetings. From there, they may be considered by national committees that focus on legislative issues, regulatory matters, and cooperative management and community programs. Ultimately, proposals approved by the national committees go to the NRECA annual business meeting, where delegates from co-ops across the country vote on which resolutions become official policy.

Montana's cooperatives have a leadership role in this process. Chris Christensen, a director at NorVal Electric Cooperative, serves on the NRECA Board of Directors, and I serve on the NRECA Legislative Committee.

I encourage co-op members to stay engaged in this important process. If you'd like to review the MECA or NRECA resolutions books, please email meca@mtco-ops.com. And if you have an idea for a new resolution — or a change to an existing one — please share it with your co-op board's district representative. Your voice helps shape the future of the cooperative network. 

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On the moooove

Rancher drives cattle through downtown Livingston

STORY AND PHOTOS BY **RYAN HALL** | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR

ON Valentine's Day, early morning visitors to Livingston experienced a Montana "traffic jam," as 400 head of cattle were walked down Park Street on their way from grazing ground to the Jesson Rock N Ranch just west of town.

Police cleared the main drive, and friends and family blocked the side streets as the cows made the short trek through town on their 5-mile journey. From there, they went under I-90 and headed home.

"It went really good," said Matt Jesson, a Park Electric Cooperative board trustee and owner of the ranch. "We were done and eating breakfast back home by 10 a.m."

He said this was the fifth year the cows have been run through town. Prior to that, the Jessons hauled their cattle. However, years of corrals in the flats being drifted over with snow, workers being stepped on and poles being snapped by plows was enough to convince the Jessons to do an old-fashioned cattle drive. Jesson said it's faster, typically goes smoothly and all the crew members get home earlier without their feet being smashed by cows.

"That many cows, it'd probably take two days to haul them all," he said, noting that about half of the cows this year were a neighbor's heifers.

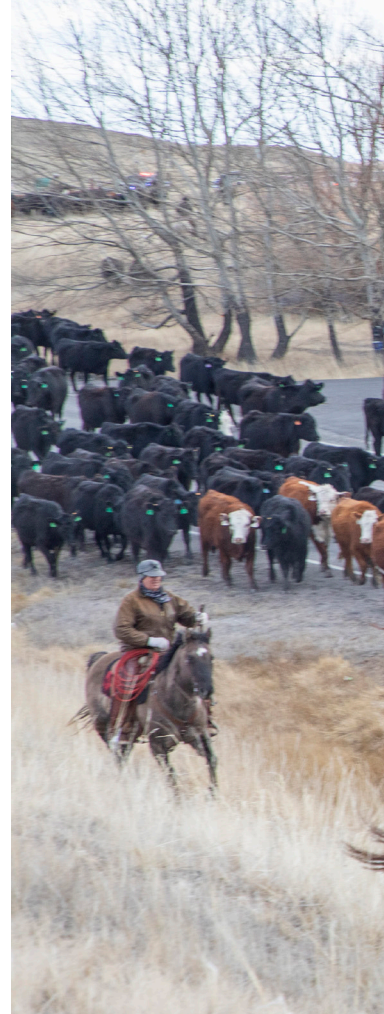
The clear, although chilly, morning was perfect for the cattle drive, Jesson added.

"(The weather) has been unreal," he said.

The streets were also mostly clear, as the

Jesson did their best to keep the date and time of the drive quiet. Jesson said the less people on the street, the smoother the drive goes, though most people in town are understanding and try to stay out of the way while watching.

"It's no big deal in Wilsall or Clyde Park, they do it all the time. For some reason, it turned into a big deal here," he said with a laugh. RM



RIGHT: Cows from the Jesson Rock N Ranch move down Highway 10 after walking through Livingston on their way back to the ranch.



ABOVE: A ranch worker monitors the cows as they pass the "Entering Livingston" sign on their way to the ranch outside of town.

LEFT: A Montana traffic jam at the on-ramps to I-90 occurred for a few minutes as the cows moseyed through the intersection on their way home.



Rural Montana file graphic

SPRAYER **BOOM WIDTH: 90'-130'**

Sprayers have a turning radius ranging from 29'-32', and the booms when raised are approximately 8' off the ground when they turn.

FARMING DANGER

KEEP LARGE FARM EQUIPMENT AWAY FROM POWERLINES

COOOPERATIVES across the state are seeing an increase in powerlines being struck by farm machinery. One co-op reported the increase in powerline hits in its area is due to newer machinery being taller and having additional features.

The standard powerline over farmland is 15.5 feet high. Some new combines, grain carts and augers easily eclipse that height. Additionally, the travel height of air seeders and the height of booms on sprayers when raised to take corners also puts them in danger of impacting powerlines. Some

new sprayers automatically raise the booms when cornering, which already has caused powerline hits at one electric co-op.

Please take the time to look at the information on this page, and if you think your equipment may be taller than the powerlines on your property, call your cooperative BEFORE you accidentally get too close. Remember, a single-phase line that runs over your property can carry a dangerous 7,200 volts of electricity. RM

A FEW COMMONLY USED OVERSIZED MACHINES

REMEMBER: TYPICAL ROAD AND FIELD ELECTRICAL POWERLINE HEIGHT IS 15'6"



LOADER

APPROXIMATE OPERATING HEIGHT: 15'6" (bucket raised)

Add another 6' to 7' if the bucket has a grapple fork.



GRAIN CART

APPROXIMATE OPERATING HEIGHTS: 16'6" TO 17'9"

Maximum auger height measured to the bottom of the downspout.



COMBINE

APPROXIMATE OPERATING HEIGHT: 16'6"

A typical operating width of a combine harvester is 17'8".

Keeping the grid secure

By **MICHAEL LEITMAN**
For Rural Montana

THE electric grid is the backbone of modern life. It powers homes, businesses and institutions, including hospitals and other critical infrastructure. As the grid becomes more interconnected and digitized, it also faces growing threats ranging from cyberattacks to extreme weather events and wildfires.

Keeping the grid reliable and resilient is essential, and electric cooperatives are actively involved in national efforts to secure the electric grid.

Electric cooperatives, other utilities and grid operators follow standards set by organizations such as the North American Electric Reliability Corporation (NERC), which mandate protections for critical infrastructure, including:

- **Cybersecurity Measures:** Firewalls, encryption and multi-factor authentication help prevent unauthorized access to control systems. Regular software updates and vulnerability scans reduce the risk of exploitation.

- **Physical Security:** Electric substations and control centers are protected with fencing, surveillance and restricted access. Physical breaches or attacks can be just as damaging as cyberattacks.

- **Redundancy and Resilience:** Backup systems and redundant lines ensure power can be rerouted during outages caused by natural events or deliberate attacks. This minimizes disruption and speeds recovery.

Each of these standards creates layers of defense, making it harder for any single failure to compromise the entire grid.

As threats evolve, so do the tools to combat them. New tools including drones, remote sensors and advanced controls allow cooperatives to be more effective in monitoring and responding to a variety of grid threats.



As the electric grid becomes more interconnected and digitized, it faces growing threats ranging from cyberattacks to extreme weather and wildfires. | PHOTO BY MAURICE VAN DER VELDEN

Automated sensors and controls allow real-time visibility across the grid and enable rapid response to emergency conditions, either by a human operator or automated settings. Artificial intelligence (AI) could be a powerful technology to enhance these other tools, especially in sifting through large amounts of data or imagery to detect irregularities or patterns.

Electric co-ops are also making investments to harden their local systems against the growing threat of wildfires, extreme weather events and other natural hazards. These investments include identifying vulnerable parts of the grid, replacing wooden poles with metal or cement poles, burying lines underground or adding enhanced technologies that allow greater visibility and control to anticipate and respond to emergency conditions.

Planning for the unexpected is critical. Utilities and government agencies conduct large-scale exercises to test their readiness for emergencies. One example is GridEx, a biennial event organized by NERC that simulates cyber and physical attacks on the electric grid. Thousands of participants, from utilities to law enforcement work

together to identify weaknesses and improve coordination.

These drills serve two purposes. They expose vulnerabilities before real crises occur, and they build relationships among key stakeholders. In an actual emergency, rapid communication and collaboration can make the difference between a minor disruption and a widespread outage.

Beyond planning exercises such as GridEx, electric co-ops also create plans and conduct trainings to practice their responses to cyber and physical attacks, and natural hazards. For example, as wildfires have become more intense and more common over a larger portion of the U.S., many co-ops are adopting wildfire mitigation plans in conjunction with grid-hardening efforts.

So, why does all this matter? A secure electric grid isn't just about keeping the lights on; it's about protecting public health, economic stability and national security in the co-op communities we serve.

By combining robust industry standards, rigorous training and cutting-edge technology, electric co-ops are helping to build a grid that is not only reliable but resilient today, and in the future. RM



Jasper and Oreo won blue ribbons and a champion plaque at the Central Montana Fair in Lewistown. Oreo is a powder puff variety of the Chinese Crested breed, but the Tholt family prefers a shaved coat for Oreo. | **PHOTO COURTESY OF NICOLE THOLT**

AKC junior dog handler is winning competitions

Prize-winning teen excited for his future in dog sports

STORY BY **CATHY MOSER** | FOR **FERGUS ELECTRIC**

JASPER Tholt of Winnett already had Oreo when he started his local 4-H dog project at age 7. With Oreo, Jasper learned and practiced the skills of a dog handler who walks into the show ring with a well-groomed and well-trained dog. By 2024, however, Oreo was too old to be a show dog, as was Trixie, the dog that Jasper's brother, Virgil, handled in 4-H.

"We were kind of looking for a new dog to show," the boys' mother, Nicole, told me on a Saturday afternoon at the Winnett Bar and Grill. Jasper sat next to her.

"I saw a Chinese Crested on Facebook, and he was an AKC (American Kennel Club) Grand Champion in

Conformation," Nicole said.

Virgil wasn't interested in the Chinese Crested with the registered name of Naked and Famous Bartender's Choice, but Jasper liked him. Oreo is also a Chinese Crested. The family then had to figure out how to get the dog from Utah to Winnett.

"My grandparents picked him up during a trip they made that was two months long," Jasper said. "I hand fed him for about a month so that he would bond to me."

The dog was 1-1/2 years old when Jasper, who is now 14, got him.

That was in May 2024. In June, Jasper and his new Chinese Crested debuted in their first AKC Junior Showmanship

competition in Casper, Wyoming. Jasper was thinking about a simpler name to call his new dog. He liked the sound of Cosmo the Chinese Crested, and since they were in Casper, he strung together the four Cs. From there, C-4, a type of explosive which makes a boom sound upon detonation. And so came the new name, Boomer.

The Chinese Crested breed offers two varieties, the powder puff and the hairless. Boomer's soft, silky coat gives him away as a Powder Puff. The AKC website describes the breed as standing between 11 and 13 inches high. Both varieties are praised for "fine-boned elegance and graceful movement," as well as "playful, loving and

DOES YOUR CHILD WANT TO SHOW A DOG?

The AKC Juniors program offers children and teens under 18 an opportunity to develop their handling skills and learn about good sportsmanship, dogs and dog shows. For more about the program, visit: <https://www.akc.org/sports/juniors/>.

devoted to their humans.”

Depending on the event, success in the show ring might rest on the dog's performance, or that of the handler, or both. In Junior Showmanship competition, success is “100 percent on the handler,” Jasper said. “I'm judged by how well I present Boomer and listen to the judge's instructions.”

Junior Showmanship offers children 9 to 18 years old the opportunity to compete with others their own age. They are judged on how well they present their dogs.

In September 2024, Jasper and Boomer debuted in Conformation during a Helena show. Conformation events are all about the dog. Judges evaluate how well the dog meets the breed standard.

“It's a tense time,” Jasper said of the show ring. And although he's focused on the judge and Boomer, “I might look over at Mom to break the tension.”

Jasper has showed Boomer in Casper, Helena, Billings, Great Falls, Missoula, Rapid City, Bismarck and the Central Montana Fair in Lewistown. They typically compete in Conformation and Junior Showmanship, but Jasper is trying out other dog sports, such as Fast CAT (Coursing Ability Test). In this competition, a dog makes a 100-yard dash after a lure, such as a plastic bag at the end of a rope. The fastest dogs win. Jasper loves the sight of Boomer running flat out because his coat “flies out like a parachute.” The sport is open to both pedigree and mixed-breed dogs.



In the show ring last December, Jasper won Best Junior Handler with this Chinese Crested named Boomer at the Owner-Handled National Finals in Orlando, Florida. | PHOTO COURTESY OF NICOLE THOLT

When a dog and handler win a competition, they earn points, and points help decide who competes in the big AKC shows. Points also create champions and grand champions. By last December, Jasper and Boomer had accrued enough points for the Owner-Handled Finals at the AKC National Championship in Orlando.

“It is the biggest show in America,” Nicole said. “There were over 5,000 entries.”

While they didn't place in Conformation, they still had a chance for a win in the Chinese Crested Specialty for Junior Showmanship, a part of the National Championship. Jasper scored big in that one, winning Best Junior Handler. He placed first out of nine competitors.

“I was surprised and excited because there were older, more experienced juniors competing against me,” Jasper said.

For handlers who are new to the show ring, Jasper offers these tips:

“Look at the judge and listen to instructions carefully. Look happy. Handle different breeds of dogs, and don't be afraid to talk to other

handlers.”

At the Great Falls show last June, he showed 10 different breeds in the Conformation rings.

In addition to the support Jasper enjoys from his family, experienced dog handlers Braxton Hernandez and Brandon Jones of Utah, and Sarah and Mack Moore of Ennis coached and helped the young handler develop showmanship skills. Members of the Yellowstone Valley Kennel Club have believed in Jasper, cheered him on and provided extra dogs to show.

He's always looking for opportunities to deepen his connection with the rich tradition of dog shows. On his list for 2026 is a big goal.

“I want to join the Crested Club of America and compete in the Chinese Crested National Show in Ohio,” he said. He is also eyeing the grandest stage of dog shows. “I want to qualify for Junior Showmanship in the Westminster.”

And if all that isn't ambitious enough for a 14-year-old, he's excited to continue his work with his new pup, Bruno, a Bracco Italiano. RM

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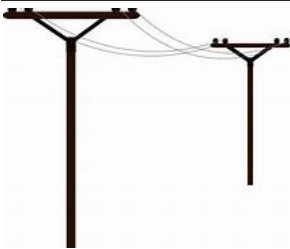
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ALONG THESE LINES . . .

By Jason Brothen, CEO



LINEWORKERS ARE READY WHEN IT MATTERS MOST

As CEO of Mid-Yellowstone Electric Cooperative (MYEC), I get to see up close what it really takes to keep the lights on for our members. Every April, we take a little extra time to recognize the folks who make that happen day in and day out—our lineworkers.

When a storm hits, and the power goes out, most people see it as an inconvenience. Our lineworkers see it as go-time. They have to leave whatever they are doing, often times heading out in tough weather to get the lights back on safely and as quickly as they can. That kind of dedication doesn't just happen; it comes from many hours of training, experience, and a strong commitment to the people we serve.

What makes it even more meaningful is that they're not just restoring power to "members." They are restoring power to their own friends, family, neighbors and communities. They live here. Their kids go to school here. They know that electricity isn't just a convenience; it keeps our farms running, businesses open, schools operating and emergency services ready. Powering the places we call home is personal.

Electric cooperatives like MYEC were built on neighbors helping neighbors, and our lineworkers live that out every day. They're often the first ones out and the last ones back, putting in long hours. And when needed, they travel to other cooperatives through mutual aid. That teamwork makes the whole cooperative family stronger.

We know it's frustrating when the lights go out, and we truly appreciate your patience and support when it happens. Linework is tough, physical and can be dangerous work. Our crews take safety seriously and rely on each other every step of the way. They take pride in doing the job right and getting the lights back on.

On April 13, we will celebrate Lineworker Appreciation Day, but honestly, they deserve more than just one day.

To our lineworkers: thank you for showing up, for being ready and for caring so much about the communities we serve. We are proud of you and grateful for all you do.

This institution is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

Your Cooperative will read non-AMR meters this month.

Take a break!



The meter reading booklets will be mailed out next month to those without AMR meters and unreadable AMR meters. If we miss you, let us know!

YOUTH TOUR WINNER IS CHOSEN

A Hysham High School student has been selected as one of 32 Montana winners of an all-expense paid trip to Washington D.C., courtesy of Mid-Yellowstone Electric Cooperative. This is the 24th year that MYEC has sponsored a winner for the Youth Tour program.

Reagan Fink, daughter of Chad and Erin Fink, will tour the nation's capital in June as part of the "Youth to Washington" Tour sponsored by the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association. The Montana youth will join more than 1,900 students from 40 states.

Fink's essay was one of ten essays submitted to MYEC by eligible students in the service area who wrote on the topic: "All cooperatives share a concern for their communities. Write about how your local cooperative supports your community or detail new ways they could get involved." Watch for a future *Rural Montana* to see Reagan's essay written about how MYEC benefits her community and supports the Town of Hysham.



SPRINGTIME IS PLANTING TIME—

DON'T PLANT THAT TREE UNDER A POWER LINE!

Don't forget to 'like us' on Facebook. This is another way to keep up with what is going on at the Coop.

OUTDOOR & INDOOR ELECTRICAL SAFETY TIPS

This time of the year is a great time for yard work, spring-cleaning and many other activities. Here are some tips to help keep you safe when you are working outdoors and indoors.

- **Inspect Outlets:** Check outdoor outlets for cracks or covers that aren't weather-sealed, and test Ground Fault Circuit Interrupters (GFCIs) to ensure they trip properly.
- **Water Safety:** Never use electric power tools or lawnmowers in the rain, on wet grass, or in puddles.
- **Clearance:** Keep ladders, trimming tools, and toys at least 10 feet away from overhead power lines.
- **Clean Appliances:** Vacuum the dust from refrigerator coils to prevent fires and improve efficiency.
- **Check Cords:** Inspect vacuum, trimmer, and appliance cords for damage. Never run cords under rugs.
- **Don't Overload:** Avoid plugging too many appliances into one outlet or surge protector.

SAVE \$\$\$
PAY YOUR BILL BY
THE DUE DATE!!

MID-YELLOWSTONE ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE, INC.



SPRING SAVINGS WORD SEARCH



Are you ready to *spring* into energy savings? When we actively try to reduce our energy use at home, we save on bills and help our community. Read the efficiency tips below, then search for (and circle) the **bolded** words in the puzzle.

Spring Energy Tips:

Unplug chargers, gaming systems and other devices. Electronics can consume **energy** when they're plugged in, even if you're not using them.

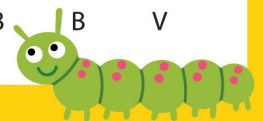
Open curtains and blinds during the day to use **natural light** instead of lamps and other home lighting.

Dress for the weather. When it's chilly, grab a **jacket** instead of turning up the **thermostat**. When it's warm, instead of turning on the A/C, open **windows** or turn on fans to circulate air.

Turn off **lights** when you're leaving the room for more than five minutes.



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MONTANA U.S. REPRESENTATIVES

In order to allow ample space for responses, Rural Montana alternates asking Montana's senators and representatives the Dateline D.C. question each month. This month features the representatives. Next month, we will ask a question of the state's two senators.

THIS MONTH'S QUESTION:

"Cyber threats to electricity infrastructure such as substations and even the power grid itself are a growing concern for utilities. What can Congress do to develop a more comprehensive cybersecurity strategy to protect critical infrastructure like electricity?"

THE SAME QUESTION WAS ASKED TO MONTANA'S TWO U.S. SENATORS IN RM'S LAST MONTH'S EDITION

**Rep. Downing**

1037 Longworth, House
Office Building,
Washington, D.C. 20515
<https://downing.house.gov>
Ph: (202) 225-3211?

Representative Troy Downing

GRID security is national security. Now more than ever, it is critical that America works to future-proof our grid to address cyber threats and increasing transmission demands.

One immediate step Congress can take to protect our grid from cyber threats is to fully fund the Department of Homeland Security. At present, DHS is shut down, leaving the fate of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency and its employees mired in uncertainty. You'll be pleased to know that I have now voted twice to fund the agency, and stand ready to do so again.

Another piece of legislation making its way

through the House is the Cyber PIVOTT Act. This bill would establish a scholarship program for students pursuing careers in cybersecurity.

Looking forward, I welcome input from Montana's electric co-ops as Congress works to strengthen grid security and reliability. If you have a question, require assistance or would like to learn more about arranging a meeting with me or my staff, please give us a call or stop by any one of our offices in Helena, Billings or Washington.

Every day, I am humbled to serve you. It is truly the honor of a lifetime. RM

**Rep. Zinke**

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Representative Ryan Zinke

CYBER threats to our energy infrastructure are growing more sophisticated by the day. Our electric grid, substations and control systems are prime targets for adversaries like China, Russia and Iran that are actively probing American networks for vulnerabilities. These systems power hospitals, military bases, businesses and homes across the country. A successful cyberattack on the grid would not just shut off the lights, it would disrupt our economy, threaten public safety and weaken national security. Protecting critical infrastructure like our power system must be treated as a top priority.

Right now, one of the biggest gaps in that defense is the Democrats shutdown of the Department of Homeland Security. DHS and its cybersecurity arm were built to coordinate with utilities, share threat intelligence and help defend critical infrastructure from digi-

tal attacks. When that capability goes offline, so does one of the federal government's most important early warning systems. Reopening DHS and restoring its full cybersecurity mission is an essential first step in building a serious national strategy to protect the grid and other critical infrastructure.

Congress should move quickly to reopen DHS and ensure it has the tools to work hand-in-hand with the private sector operators who run our energy systems. Utilities need timely threat information, clear coordination with federal agencies and the resources to secure industrial control systems that were never designed for today's cyber battlefield. Cyber warfare is the next frontier of conflict, and keeping DHS fully operational ensures we are not fighting that battle with one hand tied behind our back. RM



Savannah Nelson, a junior at Beaverhead County High School in Dillon, was chosen as Montana's Youth Leadership Council (YLC) representative in 2025. She participated in virtual meetings with the other YLCs and most recently attended the NRECA PowerXchange annual meeting in March, in Nashville.

Year as YLC

Co-op student recalls lessons from leadership program

STORY BY RYAN HALL | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR

LEADERSHIP skills and life lessons were among the things Savannah Nelson learned in her year as Montana's Youth Leadership Council (YLC) representative.

Savannah, a junior at Beaverhead County High School in Dillon, was sponsored by Vigilante Electric on the annual National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) Youth Tour. While on that trip, she filled out an application and gave a speech, hoping to become the state's YLC. She did just that.

Each state's Youth Tour delegation and/or chaperones elect one YLC, who participates in virtual meetings with the other YLCs, travels to Washington,

D.C. with them, and then joins them at the NRECA PowerXchange annual meeting in March to learn leadership skills and work at the event. This year's PowerXchange was held in Nashville.

"I feel like this trip and experience has given me more hands-on leadership experience," Savannah said during a break between sessions in Nashville.

Becoming YLC

Savannah said Jackie Sutton of Lima, a role model and mentor to her, pushed her to apply for the Youth Tour, and eventually YLC. However, Sutton told Savannah the competition was usually tough and not to get her hopes up.

"That actually motivated me to get

it," Savannah said.

She worked hard to memorize her speech, and was the only YLC candidate to recite the speech completely from memory.

A tale of two trips

Savannah said that though the Youth Tour and YLC trips both occurred in D.C., they were very different. The Youth Tour trip focused on experiences and learning about the country and cooperatives. YLC was more training oriented.

"It was more like the (Youth Tour) group went to see the Capitol and learn stories of how the nation came to be," she said. "YLC was less tours. We

learned from other leaders and learned how to build our own leadership skills.”

She said that through various trainings on her return trip to D.C. and in Nashville she learned a lot about herself. For instance, Savannah said she likes to always be busy, and stopping or sitting down feels like a waste of time. Others need rest, or time to think, before taking action.

The YLC trip focused on each student finding their own leadership style and learning how to make that work best with other leadership styles to form a strong team. She also learned that leadership strengths can become weaknesses, for instance if someone takes control in a group setting and doesn't let others use their strengths to shine and help the team.

“(The program) helped me regulate how I am in a (team) project, and hold back my strengths sometimes, and recognize who can do what,” Savannah said.

Forming bonds

Along the way, the YLC reps from across the country tried out new experiences together, learned about their similarities and differences, and became close friends. Through mastering leadership tactics and public speaking, tackling team-building exercises like an elevated ropes course, and even learning dinner etiquette, the group came together and formed friendships.

“Everybody cares so much for each other, it's almost like a family,” Savannah said.

She said she learned to talk about herself and her feelings, something she has struggled with in the past.

“I definitely feel like when I'm in school, I feel like I'm different. I feel awkward with people,” Savannah said.

The YLC program has helped her feel more comfortable having one-on-one conversations, especially with those she doesn't know well, and to be more open.

“It's been a really good experience,” Savannah said. “I think I've gotten more confident in myself.”



“

It's been a really good experience. I think I've gotten more confident in myself.

— Savannah Nelson,

Montana's Youth Leadership Council representative

”

Through the YLC program, Savannah has also become a much more confident public speaker. Her YLC candidate speech last year at Youth Tour orientation was only her second speech. When she delivered a speech at the Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association Annual Meeting in October, that was her first time on stage.

Last month, she stood on stage in Nashville in front of thousands of co-op leaders, first to carry the American flag during the opening ceremonies of the first general session, and later to introduce herself as Montana's YLC.

She also learned to network, and was exposed to different cultures in Nashville. She said that every adult

co-op leader she met in Nashville was supportive, and seemed genuinely interested in what she had to say.

“It's really nice to come here and have so many adults want to help you with your future career,” Savannah said.

Prior to the Youth Tour and YLC, Savannah never saw herself working for an electric cooperative. And while she is still undecided on her future career, she no longer excludes co-ops from the possibilities.

“I am all for the cooperative business model,” she said, noting the way electric cooperatives support rural communities really appeals to her.

Looking to the future

Savannah said she hopes that any Montana students who are eligible consider the Youth Tour, and that anyone who goes on the trip takes the opportunity to apply for YLC, even if it means stepping outside their comfort zone.

“I don't think we can improve society if we don't give our young people the opportunity to step outside their bubble,” she said.

And while she doesn't yet know what career she wants to pursue, Savannah said that through the Youth Tour and YLC programs, she has learned that it will likely be connected in some way to electricity.

“I feel like electricity goes hand-in-hand with everything,” she said. RM

Shear Madness

Dillon-area family brings local wool to U.S. made clothing

STORY AND PHOTOS BY RYAN HALL | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR

THERE is only one made-in-the-USA wool brand from sheep to clothing in the United States, and it's based just outside Dillon.

Duckworth clothing is co-owned by Vigilante Electric Cooperative member John Helle, whose family shears nearly 10,000 sheep each year to provide about 80,000 pounds of wool for the clothing brand. They also buy another 180,000-plus pounds of U.S. wool. The wool is spun, dyed and stitched in factories across the U.S., said Evan Helle, John's son. He noted that Duckworth products are produced in more than 30 factories across 17 states, with many of the factories specializing in one part of the process or one garment. Products include everything from socks and base-layer garments to performance wear and coats.

"We've taken the itchiness out of it and developed wool for next to your skin, which is the best place to put it," John said.

The Helles raise Rambouillet-Merino sheep, which produce a very fine wool. Generations of refining genetics have made the Duckworth wool finer, softer and less itchy than most other wool produced in the U.S. That itchy blanket many people remember from their youth is not among the many Duckworth products.

"Not on this ranch," John said with a laugh.

In the beginning

John's grandfather started the ranch in the late 1920s or early 1930s, adding adjoining land as he could.

"Land was cheap if you wanted to work hard," John said.

He noted that between the ranch-



ABOVE: Duckworth clothing owner John Helle checks wool after it was removed from a sheep. **LEFT:** The crimps in this wool gives it an elastic property when it is made into yarn. | PHOTOS BY RYAN HALL

land and leases, their sheep now have access to about 100,000 acres of grazing land, including federal mountain land leases.

"One thing people don't realize is that the mountains are actively managed by agriculture. The national

forest summer grazing allotments allow us to have the ranch. If we didn't have the allotments, we would be a quarter of the size we are," Evan said, adding the ranch appreciates being able to team with the U.S. Forest Service to manage the land.

"That what makes what we do so sustainable," he said.

In 2014, John Helle, John Edwards, Graham Stewart and Rob Bernthal formed Duckworth clothing to vertically integrate the wool business,



ABOVE: Part of the Helle family's flock waits to be sheared. **LEFT:** A shearer works on a young ram. | **PHOTOS BY RYAN HALL**

making a truly Made-In-America product.

The mission statement is simple:

To revitalize the American wool industry through American manufacturing.

"We pretty much are the only ones in the U.S. doing what we do," Evan said.

The company started with a retail store model until the pandemic hit in 2020, and many stores closed their doors for months.

"We had to pivot our whole company around to online direct," John said. "It was the perfect model."

The ranch and Duckworth are family businesses with John, Evan, Evan's brother Weston and John's brother Tom all working on different phases of the operation. Evan has a business management degree, John has an animal science background, Tom is the tech manager and Weston has a range-science degree.

More than just shearing

Wool production is a science at the ranch. Everything is done with the goal of producing the best wool for each product, and ensuring that future generations of sheep are even better at it than today's generation.

On this day, there are four shearers, all from Montana, working through a

Duckworth

See the full line of Duckworth clothing online at www.duckworthco.com

set of young rams. Each time a shearer grabs a ram, one of the Helles uses a wand to read the ear tag on the sheep. A label is printed and paired with the wool once it is sheared. The wool is then laid out on a round table with slats in it. Crew members shake any dirt off the wool and pick out any bad pieces. From there, it is taken to a station to be checked for quality.

John's brother Tom takes a small sample of the wool and gives it to Liz Maxwell of the Montana Wool Lab at Montana State University (MSU) – one of only two such labs in the country. Maxwell scans the label and puts the sample in a machine, which scans it and records the length, thickness, curvature, crimp (elasticity), comfort factor (averaging 100 percent this day) and other data. A larger sample will be tested at the lab later for strength. That data can then be used by the Helles to refine the genetics of the herd to continue producing the best wool.

"(The Montana Wool Lab) has just been instrumental in helping us apply the technology," John said.

A new age of wool

The Helles note that Duckworth is a different kind of wool clothing company than most people would expect. Longjohn base-layers, athletic moisture-wicking clothing, sweatshirts that stay tight at the waist and cuffs without elastic, various coats and high-performance wool socks are all in the product line.

John said that while many people think of wool socks as bulky and tending to fall down, that isn't the case anymore. Modern wool socks hold their shape, are lightweight and more comfortable.

"The wool sock business in America has been really good," John said. "The socks are the gateway drug to wool (products). People try the wool socks then move to base-wear."

Evan said that Duckworth clothing is pricier than some options because of its quality and durability. As he spoke, the Helles worked on the line moving wool back and forth, all wearing Duckworth shirts, coats or sweatshirts that had stood up to the elements and various hazards of working with sheep and machinery day after day.

"American factories have a style of overbuilding (the products they produce), so our products are made to last," Evan said. RM



1st
PLACE

Maple Cookie Bars

Gaye Lynn Genereux | BIG SANDY

INGREDIENTS

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 4 cups AP flour | FROSTING: |
| 2 tsp. baking soda | 1/3 cup butter |
| 1/2 tsp. salt | 1/2 cup brown sugar |
| 1/2 cup butter, softened | 1/3 cup heavy cream |
| 1/2 cup cream cheese, softened | 2 T real maple syrup |
| 1 cup brown sugar | 2 tsp. maple extract |
| 1 egg | 3 cups powdered sugar |
| 1 cup maple syrup | 4 oz. cream cheese, softened |
| 1 tsp. vanilla extract | |
| 1/2 tsp. maple extract | |

DIRECTIONS

FOR BARS:

Preheat oven to 350 degrees and grease jellyroll pan. Sift first three ingredients and mix well.

In a large bowl, cream the remaining ingredients, beating well after each addition. Add in the flour mixture and stir until well blended.

Spread the dough evenly in the jellyroll pan and bake for 24-26 minutes.

Cool and frost with maple-brown sugar frosting (see right).

FOR FROSTING:

Heat the butter and sugar in a small sauce pan, add the cream and maple syrup, and continue heating and stirring often until the mixture comes to a boil.

Remove from the heat and pour into a mixing bowl. Add the maple extract and the powdered sugar a cup at a time, beating with a mixer until smooth each time.

Add the cream cheese to the frosting and beat until smooth.

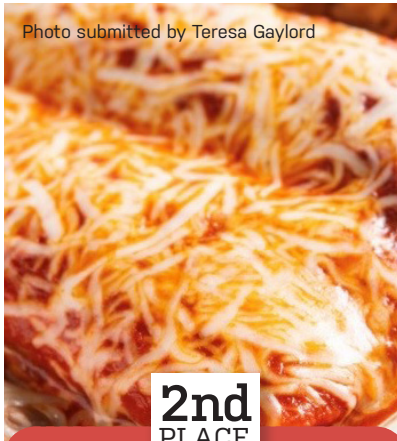


Photo submitted by Teresa Gaylord

2nd
PLACE

Creamy Chicken Enchiladas

Teresa Gaylord | KALISPELL

INGREDIENTS

- 1 can (10 oz.) red enchilada sauce**
- 2-1/2 cups shredded chicken**
- 2 cups cheddar cheese, shredded**
- 2 cups Monterey Jack cheese, shredded**
- 8 oz. cream cheese, cut into 1/2-inch cubes**
- 1 can cream of chicken soup**
- 1 (1 oz.) pkg. fajita seasoning**
- 10 flour tortillas (6 inch)**

DIRECTIONS

Heat oven to 375 degrees. Grease 13x9-inch baking dish. Spread 1/4 cup of the enchilada sauce in bottom of baking dish. Combine chicken, 1 cup cheddar cheese, 1 cup Monterey Jack cheese, cream cheese, soup and seasoning. Spoon slightly less than 1/2 cup filling onto each tortilla. Roll up tightly; place seam-side down in baking dish. Drizzle with remaining Enchilada sauce. Cover and bake 15 minutes. Sprinkle with remaining cheese. Bake uncovered 15 minutes, or until bubbly and lightly browned.



SEND IN YOUR RECIPES

Recipes for *RM* magazine are submitted by cooperative members across the state. First, second and third place monthly winners are awarded \$30, \$20 and \$10 prizes, respectively. Send your recipes to *RM* Recipes, Box 3469, Great Falls, MT 59403, or email rural@mtco-ops.com. **Please include your name, hometown and an address. If you do not include this information, your submission will not be accepted.** For May send recipes for your favorite dishes that are saucy or use a gravy by April 16. Please send in June recipes anytime: **Your best specialty diet recipes (vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free).** Try to limit the ingredients and length of directions for space. Please include a photo, if possible.



Photo submitted by Lorianne Stogsdill

3rd
PLACE

Exploding Oreo Bon-Bons

Lorianne Stogsdill | WHITEFISH

INGREDIENTS

- 1 package (14 oz.) Oreos**
- 8 oz. cream cheese, softened**
- 12 oz. chocolate chips**
- Butter for melting chocolate**
- 6 pkgs. Pop Rocks, optional**

DIRECTIONS

Crush (or process) Oreos into small pieces. Transfer crumbs to a mixing bowl and add softened cream cheese. Mix until combined. Shape mixture into small balls, about 1 T each. Roll each ball in Pop Rocks and place on a baking tray, and freeze for 10 minutes. Melt chocolate chips with a little butter in the microwave or a double boiler. Dip the cold Oreo balls in the melted chocolate. Sprinkle extra Pop Rocks on top. Store in the refrigerator or freezer. Makes about 2 dozen.



SUBMIT YOUR EVENTS

To list an event, send it to: RM Events, PO Box 3469, Great Falls, MT 59403 or email us at: rural@mtco-ops.com — Submit items by April 16 for May events. Include date, time, site, city and contact number with your event. **Events without such info will not be used.**

NORTHWEST

April 2

Spring into Health and Safety Fair — All ages, Bigfork Senior Center, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., free CPR/AED class on site from 9 to 10 a.m., | **KALISPELL**

April 9-12

Pondera Players presents Fiddler on the Roof — Orpheum Theatre, Thurs-Sat: 7 p.m., Sun: 2 p.m. | **CONRAD**

April 10-12

60th Annual Creston Auction & County Fair — Hwy. 35, Fri (consignment day): 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., Sat (general auction): begins 9 a.m., Sun (vehicle, equipment and marine): begins 11 a.m., 250-7396. | **CRESTON**

April 14

Northwest Montana Photographers meeting — Columbia Falls Fellowship Church, 7 p.m. | **COLUMBIA FALLS**

April 18

Teakettle Quilt Guild 2026 Quilt Show — Glacier Gateway Elementary School, 9 a.m. to 3:45 p.m., 249-7216 | **COLUMBIA FALLS**

April 18

South Fork Roundup of Cowboy Poetry and Music sponsored by the Augusta Area Historical Society — Roundup Barn, 2 miles east of Augusta on Highway 21, 11 a.m., 403-9608 | **AUGUSTA**

April 18

Flathead Valley Earth Day Expo 2026: Powering Our Future — Flathead Valley Community College, Arts & Technology Building, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. | **KALISPELL**

April 20

Westerners Int'l presents North Fork Homestead by Zach Block — NW Montana History Museum, 6:30 to 8 p.m., 309-0958 | **KALISPELL**

April 21

KalisPELL Women's Connection Luncheon — Guest speaker is Karen Spalding, 1830 Hwy. 35, 11:30 a.m., call 261-9894 for reservations or information | **KALISPELL**

April 22

Columbia Falls Women's Connection Luncheon — Guest speaker is Karen Spalding, 827 9th St. West, 11:30 a.m., call 892-3621 for reservations | **COLUMBIA FALLS**

May 6

Flathead Valley Community Band and Columbia Falls Community Choir Concert — Flathead High School Auditorium, 7:30 p.m., 270-1696 | **KALISPELL**

May 16

KalisPELL Senior Center Annual Tea Party Fundraiser — 40 11th St. West, 11:30 a.m., 609-5351 | **KALISPELL**

May 18

Westerners Int'l presents Battle of the Little Big Horn: 150 Years Later by Tim Christenson — NW Montana History Museum, 6:30 to 8 p.m., 309-0958 | **KALISPELL**

SOUTHWEST

April 2

Cyber Safety Clinic — University of Western Montana STC Great Room, 2 to 4:30 p.m., 663-5511 | **DILLON**

April 4

American Legion Post and Auxillary Annual Easter Egg Hunt — Lewis and Clark Park, 10 a.m., 369-8843 | **STEVENSVILLE**

April 7

Wildlife Prevention Open House — Nine Mile Community Center, 5 to 7 p.m., 626-4294 | **HUSON**

April 10

Chamber After Hours — Badger Archery, 5 to 7 p.m., 988-0035 | **DILLON**

April 18

Spring Market — Craft Market, Ravalli County Fairgrounds, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., 360-6743 | **HAMILTON**

April 18

Rummage Sale — Puzzles, games, craft supplies, Three Mile Community Center, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., 360-3385 | **STEVENSVILLE**

April 18

Montana Rockies Bluegrass Association's Spring Festival & Fundraiser — 19 bands playing from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m., The Neely Center, 821-3777, mtbluegrass.com | **VICTOR**

April 25

Black, White & Read All Over - A boot-stomping shindig to benefit the North Valley Public Library — The Barn on Pine Hollow, 5 to 8 p.m., 777-5061 | **STEVENSVILLE**

April 25-26

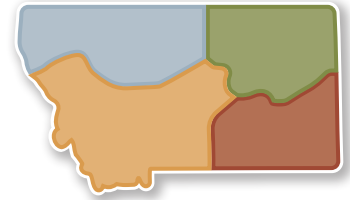
Missoula Quilters' Guild Spread Your Wings Quilt Show — Vendor market, auction, raffles, Western Montana Fairgrounds, Fri: 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., Sat: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., 531-2156 | **MISSOULA**

May 9

Mother's Day Market — Craft Market, Ravalli County Fairgrounds, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., 360-6743 | **HAMILTON**

May 22-25

44th Annual Wildhorse Rendezvous — 531-0244 | **CYR**



SOUTHEAST

April 10-11

Montana State University Billings Powwow — MSU Billings, Fri: Grand Entry 7 p.m., Sat: Grand entry noon and 6 p.m., MSUBillings.edu/powwow | **BILLINGS**

April 11

Ben Larson: "Off the Beaten Path: The Lost History of Montana" — O'Fallon Historical Museum, 6 to 8 p.m., 778-3265 | **BAKER**

April 18

PEAKS Style Show & Luncheon — Benefits cancer patients. Raffles, door prizes, art auction, St. Bernard Catholic Church, prior ticket purchase or RSVP required, 697-1098 | **BILLINGS**

April 25-26

Big Sky Optimist Club Fundraiser Vendor Market — Boys and Girls Club, 55 Orchard Ave., doors open at 10 a.m. 855-2416 | **BILLINGS**

May 2

High Tea at the Museum with Fallon County Community Theater — O'Fallon Historical Museum, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., 778-3265 | **BAKER**

May 2

Pub Station Presents Three Dog Night — Alberta Bair Theater, 7:30 p.m., 256-6052 | **BILLINGS**

May 22

Keith Alessi: Tomatoes Tried to Kill Me, but Banjos Saved My Life — O'Fallon Historical Museum, 3 to 5 p.m., 778-3265 | **BAKER**

YOUNG MONTANANS

RM invites youngsters to send in original art and poems. If we use it, we'll pay you \$10. **Mail to:** Young Montanans, P.O. Box 3469, Great Falls, MT 59403. **Email:** rural@mtco-ops.com. **Include:** Your name, age, address and your cooperative. **If you do not include this information, your submission will not be accepted.**

SEND US YOUR SPRING AND SUMMER DRAWINGS AND POEMS



Mischa Schmidt, 12 | FLATHEAD ELECTRIC



Alexia Lee, 10, Kallispell | FLATHEAD ELECTRIC



Annabelle Whitmoyer, 8, Corvallis | RAVALLI ELECTRIC

Selena Jessop, 12, Pinesdale | RAVALLI ELECTRIC



RURAL MONTANA
READER 
PHOTOS

SEND US YOUR PHOTOS OR ARTWORK

Please include: the photographer's/artist's name, address and hometown in the entry. ***If you do not include this information, your submission will not be accepted.*** If we use your photo we'll pay you \$25-\$100 (depending on size and location). **Send entries to:** rural@mtco-ops.com. No more than 20 MB at a time. No prints please.



'Abandoned in Eastern Montana'

A painting by Gina Tiernan of Corvallis.

Pretty Posie

A springtime flower. **Photo by Lilly Coats, 13, of Worden**



Saddle Stand

A young lady stands on a well-trained horse's back. **Photo by Amber Rasmussen of Missoula**



Hooo...is watching me?

A curious short-eared owl checks out a visitor.

Photo by Austin Berard of Missoula





The Magazine of the
Montana Electric Cooperatives'
Association

Visit us online: www.mtco-ops.com

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