

# Park County



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*Sunset in the lower Shield's Valley, by Mary Anne Keyes.*

**P**ark County, located just north of Yellowstone National Park, provides the only year-round gateway entrance. The county itself encompasses over 1.7 million acres, including 57% public lands and the highest peak in Montana – Granite Peak. Just over 17,000 residents enjoy the beautiful expanse of scenic mountains and river valleys the landscape offers. The largest employment categories are typical of a tourism-based economy: accommodations, service, retail, then construction, healthcare, and social assistance. Nine communities are spread throughout the county beginning with Wilsall in the north and ending with Cooke City in the far southeast. Livingston, population of approximately 8,000, and the largest, is centrally located. The Park County MSU Extension office has four staff members who provide research-based, non-biased information to county clientele.

## **Park County 4-H: Empower Youth with Skills to Lead for a Lifetime**

Over 130 youth are involved in traditional 4-H club project work and are supported by 42 volunteer leaders. These clubs spread across the county from Wilsall to Gardiner. Youth learn leadership, parliamentary procedure, and public speaking skills.

Another 78 youth are in short-term, in-school programming focused on mental health and food safety.

### **4-H Teen Leader Development**

Activity Day is the result of a vision by teen 4-H leaders. They planned a day where members from across the county came together to learn about different projects, have fun, and make new friends. On May 8, 10 teen leaders hosted Activity Day: the teens organized two guest speakers and led different workshops about gardening, sewing, leathercrafting, and 4-H project jeopardy. They also reserved the facility and secured a sponsorship for snacks. One teen shared, “This event has helped me become more confident. The first year, we needed a lot of help. 2021 was our fourth year. We did it all by ourselves.”

### **Youth Aware of Mental Health**

High school is different now than it used to be. Over half of the freshman in Gardiner and Shields Valley High Schools experienced depression, either personally or through their family or close friend. These freshmen participated in the Youth Aware of Mental Health class led by Mary Anne Keyes; part of the Montana State University Center for Research on Rural Education project. Freshmen learn basic mental health terminology, work through role play scenarios with each other, and discuss the results with the entire class. “The role plays

are the best part—they allow us to dig into deeper issues than we normally would,” one participant remarked.

#### Food Safety Education

Partnering with the Park High School (PHS) Family and Consumer Sciences teacher, Veronica Baca helped 41 PHS students earn their ServSafe Safe Food Handler Certificate. As a nationally-recognized certification, this gives students interested in culinary arts or the hospitality industry a leg up. Three Livingston area restaurants give students who have this certificate a dollar per hour wage increase.

## Monitoring pilot program for noxious weeds in Park County

Managing weeds in Park County can be as difficult as any other county in Montana. Weeds are often sprayed, mowed or pulled when landowners can find the spare time, but rarely can they look at how effective their treatment methods really are. To address this concern, MSU Extension in Park County has partnered with the Park County Environmental Council, Park CWMA and the local NRCS office on a two-year pilot monitoring program to look at the effects of weed management across the county.

Through a grant funded by AMB West Philanthropies, a three-quarter time employee will head a monitoring effort to look at effectiveness of chemical treatments of state-listed noxious weeds. Monitoring efforts will focus on recently treated areas that were part of a two-year grant funded by the Montana Noxious Weed Trust Fund.

The other major focus of this project will look at the viability of biocontrol releases. Two species have been the recent focus of biocontrol, led by the Park CWMA. Leafy spurge flea beetles (*Aphthona* spp) have been released to control leafy spurge, while spotted knapweed root weevils (*Cyphocleonus achates*) have been used for spotted knapweed control. The Park CWMA has worked very closely with the Montana Biocontrol project to secure insects that are appropriate for the climate in the county. Many sites across Park County have seen biocontrol releases and will be considered for inclusion in the monitoring program.

The overall goals of the monitoring program are to capture the noxious weed infestations across the county, monitor treatment areas for efficiency and efficacy and to count biocontrol insect populations to determine effectiveness. The plan is with a successful pilot program, the need for a permanent monitoring program will become apparent and this position can become fully funded within an organization in Park County.



**Top:** Audrey, a 4-H teen leader, helps Alissa with her leathercraft project at Activity Day, by Mary Anne Keyes; **Bottom:** Leafy spurge flea beetles in a sweep net, by Josh Bilbao

## Park County Staff

Montana State University Extension is an ADA/EO/AA Veteran's Preference Employer and provider of educational outreach.

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