

Park County

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Park County, viewed from the AMB West ranch, by Veronica Baca.

Park County, located just north of Yellowstone National Park, provides the only year-round gateway entrance. The county 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, and 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, the largest, with a population of approximately 8,000, is centrally located. Park County MSU Extension has four staff members who provide research-based, non-biased information to county clientele.

Weed Education Field Day

Weed Management is at the front of the mind for many residents in Park County. Whether the goal is to preserve the beauty of our native landscape or increase agricultural land

productivity, most can agree that managing noxious weeds is essential to the health of our ecosystem. When constituents' experiences, education levels, and aspirations are wide and varied, it requires a collaborative effort across organizations to meet interested parties where they are. On a beautiful September morning, MSU Extension, Park County Cooperative Weed Management Area (CWMA), Shields Valley Watershed Group (SVWG), Park County Conservation District, Park County Environmental Council (PCEC), and the MT Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) facilitated an invasive weed education field day at Ed Schillings' Ranch in Clyde Park. This collaborative effort brought together quality speakers and 24 landowners. Twenty participants were awarded two credits each toward their pesticide applicator licenses.

Activities included demonstrations for Early Detection and Distribution (EDD) maps on smartphones and tablets, paper mapping tactics, weed monitoring using transects, and backpack sprayer calibration. Presentations and discussions followed about biocontrol, grazing, and integrated weed management. The event concluded with a barbecue where additional resources were shared. A similar event was held in

the spring in Paradise Valley. MSU Extension will continue offering weed field days in the spring and fall to reach all of Park County's landowners.

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

Through Park County 4-H, more than 100 youth are involved in traditional 4-H club project work and are supported by 45 volunteer leaders. These clubs are spread across the county from Wilsall to Gardiner. They allow youth to learn leadership, parliamentary procedures, and public speaking skills. Over one week in June, members come together to gain additional skills in a collaborative effort across clubs at summer camp.

Park County 4-H Camp is a 4-day, 3-night experience for 4-H members 8-14 years old. The theme-based activities are planned and led by the 4-H Teen Leaders. Each day multiple sessions focus on team building, communication, and leadership skills in a fun, hands-on environment. Campers are engaged in learning and self-discovery from the early morning hours until after sunset. This year, 11 counselors hosted a group of 40 campers at launching, archery, and the obstacle course.



Building Community Leadership Capacity

Leadership 49, a program of Park County MSU Extension, is a nine-month leadership development program for Park County citizens that is comprised of immersive, day-long sessions hosted in different communities and a group project. Participants develop leadership skills, increase their knowledge about challenges and opportunities within Park County, and network with community groups, leaders, businesses, elected officials, and others.

A thriving community needs a deep base of community leaders, and this program aims to build a foundation and strengthen it by creating connections through a shared learning experience. The ninth year of the program kicked off with an overnight retreat in mid-September. This class of 13 citizens will continue their leadership journey through May 2023 when they graduate and join the ranks of more than 135 alumni.



Strength in Numbers

As Park County has struggled with labor shortages over the past two years, MSU Extension has also worked to fill staff positions. The office is fully staffed again, with a renewed direction and colleagues to discuss challenges and offer solutions.

Heidi Nunnikhoven was hired in October as the Extension Financial and Education Program Coordinator. She knows and loves MSU Extension, coming from 10 years at Montana State University Extension as the Account Analyst for Nutrition Education Programs. She will be involved in a variety of community programs offered by MSU Extension Park County. While working at MSU Extension, she completed her Master's Degree in Exercise and Nutrition Sciences. She loves getting outside and exercising while doing tasks such as gardening or





Previous Page: (top) Dancing at camp, by Veronica Baca; **(center)** Leadership 49 Retreat at the AMB West ranch, by Veronica Baca; **(bottom)** Yellowstone River, by Veronica Baca; **This Page:** Citizens at the Park County Weed Field Day, by Jackie Pondolfino

playing in the mountains on skis and bikes, and hiking with her husband Tony and daughters.

Jackie Pondolfino began as the Agriculture and 4-H Youth Development Agent in Park County in September. Jackie grew up outside of Cooperstown, New York - home to the Baseball Hall of Fame and many dairy cows. She attended the University of New Hampshire, earning a degree in agriculture, focusing on plant biology. Her favorite mentor during college was an Extension Agent, so naturally, she dreamt of working in the same field after graduation. In 2019, Jackie moved to Montana after visiting her extended family and falling in love with Montana's prairies, mountains, and people. So far, her favorite parts of the job are meetings with the Park County CWMA and field visits to clientele across Park County.

In September, Veronica Baca began a new role as the Family and Consumer Sciences and 4-H Youth Development Agent. Moving from her former role as the Financial and Education Program Coordinator to an agent will allow her more opportunities to engage with youth and community members in educational programs. A former middle school teacher, she is excited to work with young people in areas they feel passionate about as they direct their learning through 4-H and other Extension programs.

Mary Anne Keyes transitioned to a new role within Extension in July this year. After more than 15 years as the FCS/4-H agent for Park County, she is looking forward to a new challenge: Community and Economic Development Agent. A long-time resident of the county, she frequently serves in an active role in the community, hosting community-wide events, creating connections between area non-profit groups, serving on committees, and always working towards the greater good of Park County. She looks forward to continuing her work serving Park County communities.

Park County Staff



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

Mary Anne Keyes

Economic and Community Development Agent

Veronica Baca

Family and Consumer Sciences and 4-H Youth Development

Jackie Pondolfino

Agriculture and 4-H Youth Development Agent

Heidi Nunnikhoven

Financial and Education Program Coordinator