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MISSOULA PARKS AND RECREATION PRESS RELEASE

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Public invited to Bluebird Preserve Open Space Grand Opening April 22

MEDIA NOTE: Mayor Jordan Hess, Ward 2 City Council representative Mirtha Becerra, City staff, City/USFS Trail Ranger Audrie Bayham, representatives from Five Valleys Land Trust and Missoula Animal Control will be available for media interviews at the event from 9:30 to 10:30 a.m.

Parks and Recreation and its partners invite residents to celebrate Earth Day by exploring Missoula's newest open space—the 124-acre Bluebird Preserve at the foot of Grant Creek. The Preserve's grand opening is on Saturday, April 22, from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. The trailhead is on the east side of Grant Creek Road, between Expo Parkway and Stonebridge Rd., at the north end of the Snowbowl carpool lot.

Mayor Jordan Hess says open space is especially important as our city grows, and he'll be on hand Saturday to celebrate the Preserve's opening. "The Bluebird Preserve is another jewel in our open space system. It further protects the North Hills and provides an opportunity for people living in Grant Creek and other nearby neighborhoods to enjoy our beautiful outdoors. It also provides habitat for its namesake bird," Hess says. The North Hills is home to both Western and Mountain bluebirds.

The new Preserve offers several miles of moderate-grade trails to accommodate a variety of users and provides scenic overlooks of the Missoula and Bitterroot valleys. Grant Creek Trail Association member Karen Sippy is pleased to see the expansion of Missoula's trail system. "The Preserve and trail system has been a much-appreciated addition to the neighborhood and Missoula's Conservation Lands. The well-constructed trails and beautiful views they provide are already very popular with residents and visitors," Sippy says.

Ward 2 City Council Representative Sierra Farmer says the Bluebird parcel brings much-needed recreational access to the Grant Creek, Captain John Mullan, Westside, and Northside neighborhoods. "I'm thrilled to see the new Bluebird Preserve open to the public. It will be a great addition to recreation opportunities for these neighborhoods, and I applaud the staff that helped make it happen. We are so lucky to live in a city that prioritizes access to public lands," she says.

The Bluebird property adds critical habitat, unique resources, and valuable ecosystem services to Missoula's Conservation Lands System, according to City Conservation Lands Manager Jeff Gickhorn. In addition, the area is home to Missoula Phlox (*Phlox missoulensis*), a species of native wildflower known only to exist on the rocky, wind-swept ridges of Missoula's North Hills. It's a low-growing cushion plant boasting masses of tiny white or blue-tinted flowers in the spring and summer. The Preserve's Missoula Phlox is one of only three currently known populations in the Missoula Valley. It is Montana Species of Concern, meaning it could be at risk of

extinction due to declining population trends, habitat threats, restricted distribution, or other factors. Protecting and restoring the Missoula Phlox is critical to its long-term survival, Gicklhorn added.

While the Preserve doesn't currently connect to other City open space in the North Hills, the city is working with partners and neighboring landowners to explore the potential for additional trail connections and opportunities in the vicinity, Gicklhorn says. "The vision is to one day connect the Bluebird Preserve Trails to others in the North Hills, including Waterworks Hill, to expand future open space recreation opportunities from the Grant Creek, Northside, and Rattlesnake neighborhoods."

The Bluebird project has been years in the making, says Five Valleys Land Trust Stewardship Director Jenny Tollefson. FVLT protected the area in 2019 before it was transferred to the city for \$450,000 with funding from the 2006 Open Space Bond.

"Five Valleys Land Trust purchased the Bluebird property in 2019 to conserve another important piece of the North Hills and to provide outdoor access for the neighborhoods of northwest Missoula. Since taking ownership, the City has continued this effort, developing a management plan that balances public access with protection of native plants and wildlife. We're thrilled to celebrate the opening of the Bluebird Preserve with the City, the open space bond program, Montana Snowbowl and the project's other partners, and look forward to the opportunities this open space will provide Missoulians," Tollefson says.

Ward 2 Council Representative Mirtha Becerra agrees the project is an excellent example of public-private partnership and multi-agency collaboration. "While much of the land in Grant Creek is undeveloped, only a very small fraction of that space is accessible to the public," Becerra says. "This is a great recreational opportunity for Missoulians, and I'm grateful for all the efforts that got us to today."

The Preserve is open to year-round pedestrian access, but bicycle use is not permitted at this time. Equestrian use is permitted from April 1 to September 30. Parks and Recreation asks residents to recreate responsibly and be respectful of other users and wildlife on the property. Dogs must be leashed within 200 yards of the trailhead and where posted, and owners must remove pet waste.

For more information about the project, visit www.engagemissoula.com.

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