



Flathead County at a glance

Located in Northwest Montana, Flathead County encompasses 3,262,720 acres or 5,098 square miles. Approximately 94% of the land mass is National or State Forest Land, Wilderness, Agricultural, and Corporate Timber Land. With Glacier National Park, the Bob Marshall Wilderness area and millions of acres of mountains and forest lands a short distance from any developed area in the county, there are thousands of miles of hiking, biking, cross-country skiing, and riding trails for year-round outdoor exploration. Two ski resorts, eight golf courses, Flathead Lake, and the Hungry Horse Reservoir exemplify several of the world class attractions that have helped to make Flathead County one of the fastest growing, and the third most populous county in Montana.

There are three incorporated cities in the county. Kalispell, which is the largest, has a population of approximately 22,052 (2015). Two additional major municipalities include Whitefish, with a population of 6,357, and Columbia Falls, with a population of 4,688. Countywide, the population has increased 22.1% from 74,471 in 2000, to an estimated 100,000 in 2017, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Native residents are now outnumbered by new residents. A large percentage of new residents are retirees and middle-aged professionals attracted to higher income jobs and lifestyle.

Attraction development has greatly increased in recent years, contributing to the influx of tourists and tourism-based services, and moving the economic base towards recreation and tourism, and creating new jobs in the service industry. Flathead County's population increases by 40% during the months of June through August. In 2016, tourists spent \$635.4 million in Flathead County. The health care industry has also seen considerable growth in the past 25 years, and is now the largest industry in the county, employing over 6,300 people (2016). Growth in retail shopping opportunities has also made Kalispell a regional shopping center.



Foy's Lake. Photo by Pat McGlynn.

The MSU Extension office in Flathead County works closely with county commissioners as well as county departments to provide quality services in education and development throughout the area. Collaborating with local and federal agencies, non-governmental organizations, regional and national partners, MSU Extension staff and faculty in Flathead County continue to provide cutting-edge and relevant educational outreach through a commitment to the emerging needs of their community. (Sources: Flathead County Government; Kalispell Chamber of Commerce)

International Connections

Flathead County MSU Extension 4-H agent Ben Frenstos was invited by the National 4-H Council to establish a youth development program in Romania. During a three-year fellowship, Frenstos will provide leadership and guidance for the creation of a sustainable and scalable program. This new venture will allow MSU Extension to explore international partnerships, with the potential for exchange programs and opportunities for Montana youth to see the world. The pilot will also explore connections back to MSU for sharing best practices with other state 4-H programs.

Small Acreage Landowner Seminar Series

Flathead County land use has been changing dramatically over the last 10 years. Between 2005 and 2012, 59 farms and over 80,000 acres were lost to development. Over 2,500 new people have moved into the county each year, pushing the growth rate to 5.6% in 2018. Currently over 100,000 parcels of land in Flathead County are considered small acreage - less than 100 acres. MSU Extension has created new programming to meet the needs of the evolving resident demographic.

A collaborative team was organized by MSU Extension Flathead County that includes staff from the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Department of Agriculture, Flathead County Weeds and Parks and Health Department, US Fish and Wildlife Service, MSU Extension, Glacier National Park, Flathead County Conservation District, and local agriculture businesses. A six-week Small Acreage Landowner seminar series was held in early 2018. This pilot class was limited to 35 and was sold out before it was advertised. All of the class participants had moved to the Flathead area from out-of-state or from eastern Montana.

Topics included living with a well and septic system; mitigating wildlife interactions; pasture management for cattle or horses; planting a native pollinator garden; noxious weed identification, impacts and control; woodlot management; creating defensible space from wildfires; and soil basics. Evaluations rated the class at 90% or higher.

Quotes from participants include:

“Excellent information. We made a plan, brought in someone to thin our forest and do fire mitigation. We used the information to inventory how vulnerable our house is to fire. We also walked through our acreage to check on pest damage.”

“Installed electric fencing on chicken coop and run.”

“Useful weed identification publications allowed me to identify and prioritize weed mitigation.”

In 2019, the class is being relocated to accommodate 50 people. Saving lives due to wildfire or wildlife interactions is priceless. New residents in the Flathead area feel ready to embrace the Montana lifestyle and feel successful caring for their small acreage.



Dahl Lake, Lost Prairie National Wildlife Refuge.
Photo by Pat McGlynn.

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