

Introduction of Senator Janet Ellis at FAS Owen Sowerwine Celebration May 13, 2024

Introduced by FAS President Darcy Thomas

Janet Ellis is the Montana State Senator from Senate District 41 in Helena. She is now serving her third term in the Montana Senate in that capacity, and before that she served two terms in the Montana House of Representatives, representing House District 81 in Helena.

Prior to her work in the Legislature, Janet was Montana Audubon's Senior Policy Director for 29 years. She started there in 1981 as an intern lobbyist, tasked with supporting Montana Audubon's first paid employee, a part-time lobbyist by the name of Gael Bissel. When Gael took a job with Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks before the next legislative session, Janet was hired to be Montana Audubon's second part-time lobbyist. Her position was expanded after that, as Montana Audubon began moving beyond legislative lobbying into other conservation activities. Seven years later, in 1989, Janet became Montana Audubon's first full-time staff person, overseeing the organization's first office, in Helena. For four years after that she was Montana Audubon's ONLY staff person, until through her efforts the organization developed enough financial base and operational ability to expand its in-office staff. For almost 3 decades, Janet served at Montana Audubon, to coordinate the organization's public policy and legislative work, and develop and oversee some of Montana Audubon's signature conservation projects.

During her tenure with Montana Audubon, Janet played a crucial role in protecting Owen Sowerwine. When in 1999 Flathead Audubon was informed the yearly lease fee for Owen Sowerwine would be over \$20,000 a year, we went to Janet at Montana Audubon for help. Janet did some hard negotiating with DNRC officials to obtain an affordable fee, which made possible Audubon's first 10-year OS license. A new management plan was required once this license was signed, and Janet became its primary author. She worked cooperatively with Flathead Audubon and the Montana Department of Natural Resources (DNRC) to revise and update the original conservation-based management plan written in 1980 by Sam Bibler and the Flathead County Park Board. And she coordinated the partnership between Flathead Audubon and Montana Audubon to pay for the new license and manage the Area.

In 2001, in her role as lobbyist for Montana Audubon, Janet was able to get a special-exemption amendment appended to a legislative bill that restricted long-term conservation protection on state lands. The amendment stipulated explicitly that permanent conservation for the Owen Sowerwine Area would be allowed, thus opening the way for the conservation easement we are celebrating tonight.

In 2009, as Audubon's first 20-year license for Owen Sowerwine was coming to an end, Janet also negotiated Audubon's second 10-year license. In 2019 when this second license was about to expire, things had changed. The discussion with DNRC on the future of Owen Sowerwine had shifted from talk of another 10-year license, to the possibility of putting a permanent conservation easement on the area. By that time Janet had retired from Montana Audubon and had been elected to the Montana Senate. But her commitment to protecting Owen Sowerwine had not changed. She came to Kalispell to participate in the meetings with DNRC that explored the purchase of a conservation easement for Owen Sowerwine, where she provided important historical and legal background, and offered help with any legislative avenue that would make the purchase possible.

We are honored to have Senator Ellis with us here tonight. We want to take this opportunity to thank her for being an invaluable part of our work here in the Flathead to provide continued conservation management and protection for the Owen Sowerwine Area, and for paving the legislative way for placing a permanent conservation easement on the Area.