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Distinctly MONTANA

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Looking Forward:
A Conversation with Peter Fonda

Grizzly - Coyote Encounter
Photo Essay

A large grizzly bear and a coyote are shown in a grassy field. The bear is on the right, looking towards the left. The coyote is on the left, facing away from the camera. The background is a cloudy sky.

The Stories They Tell:
Salvaged Wood's Persistent Beauty

Carol Hagan
Paintings that Transcend Prismatic Visions

Five Great Things To Do In Autumn

the resource guide to big sky country



SUN WEST RANCH

Nature at the Forefront

By Kimberley A. Yablonski
Photos courtesy Sun West Ranch

From a windswept bluff in southwestern Montana verdant rolling hills and coulees meander to greet the Madison River as it snakes through the valley. Beyond the river's flow, the land stretches wide. Then, like children running wild in the summer, it takes off uphill to meet the snow-capped mountains of the Madison and Gravelly Ranges. The landscape mesmerizes. Virtually unnoticeable in the beauty of this valley, however, are the home sites at Sun West Ranch.

Situated on 2,000 acres along the legendary Madison River in Cameron, Montana, Sun West Ranch is a unique shared ranch development. Pioneered by owner Ted Gildred, the shared ranch concept allows buyers to purchase smaller plots of land and build their dream homes while enjoying 1,600 acres of common area without the responsibility of taking care of a larger ranch themselves.

History tells us that the Blackfoot, Flathead, Nez Perce and Shoshone Native American Tribes were the first to know the beauty and bounty of this place. These tribes, it is said, agreed to allow peaceful passage through the valley because of its valued

hunting and food gathering benefits. Gildred doesn't want this beauty compromised. In developing the property, he has taken pains to ensure that the land is kept sacred. His dedication to the valley has prompted him to prohibit any home to be built on the Madison River, nor is any home site visible from the river. In addition, the majority of homes, which are limited to foot to 11 acre plots, are not visible to one another.

Archaeological surveys of the property have uncovered tipi rings, bison kills, stone tools, pictographs and other ancient artifacts that Gildred has preserved. Always planning with conservation and the preservation of wildlife habitat in mind, he even relocated several

lots to ensure these artifacts remain undisturbed.

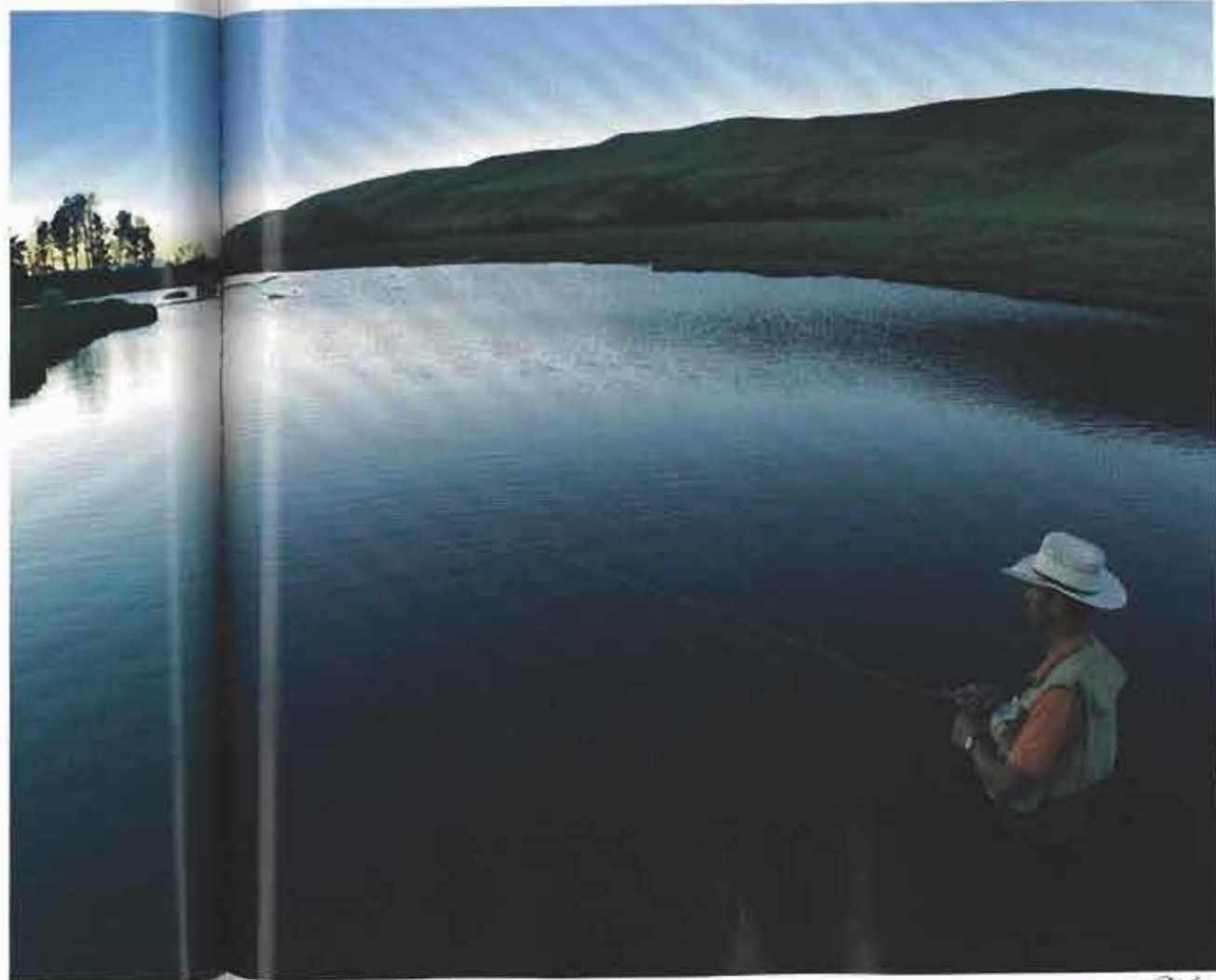
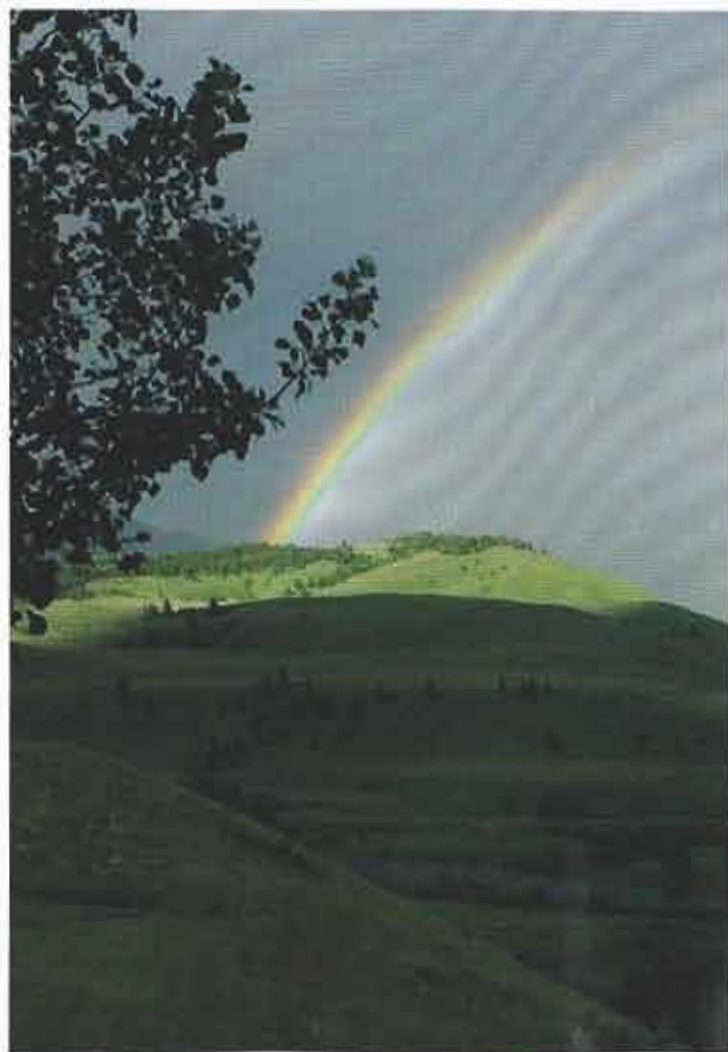
"There is so much early Native American history here. I think they probably appreciated a good piece of land as much as anyone," Gildred said.

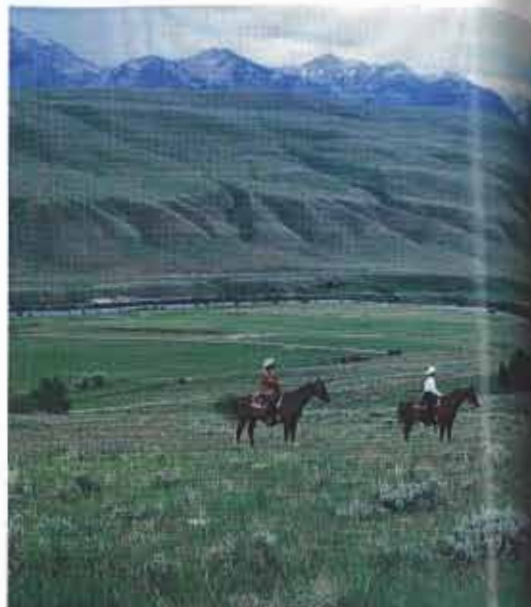
A working cattle ranch dating back to the 1800s, the original Shelton family structures, including the homestead and historic barn, have been preserved. In keeping with the land's historical uses, about 400 head of cattle are brought in each year to graze. Some end up in homeowners' front yards, but they understand, says ranch manager Steve Smelser.

"They recognize what we're trying to do here," said Smelser. "The common bond is a love of Montana."

A developer from southern California, Gildred says the shared ranch concept was simple. "We wanted to keep the land intact as much as possible — looking like it has for the last 100 years. It's such a beautiful piece of property we wanted to share it," he said.

When plotting the development, Gildred put the land first. It had to look and feel right and have as little impact on the site as possible. Owners can select from Aspen-lined draws, grasslands or pine forests. Each resident is part-owner of the 1,600 acres of common land with the understanding that it is protected. When





all 55 home sites are completed, only 400 of the 2,000 acres will be developed.

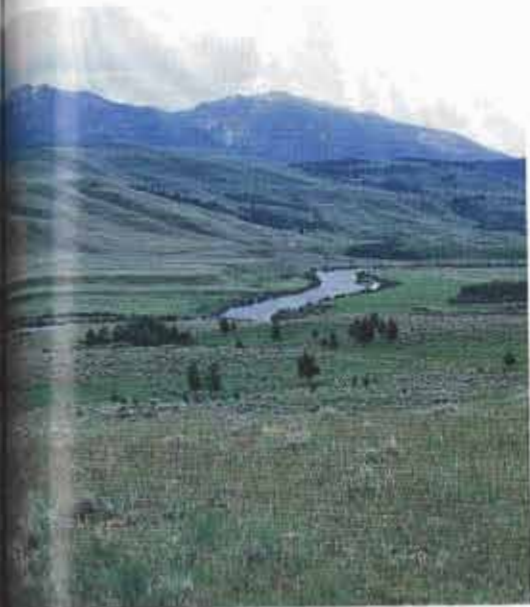
"We went out identifying sites without any particular number in mind," he said. "We are the antithesis of the Yellowstone Club. We're very upscale, but we aren't trying to be a Sun Valley or Aspen. We want the "old west" way of life that is becoming very scarce, even in Montana."

The ranch has backcountry trails, three miles of fishing access on the famed Madison River (a stretch of the river that has not been fished due to private ownership), a full equestrian facility and unparalleled views of the Madison Valley to the Continental Divide. Plans include additional horse trails and hiking trails. Yellowstone National Park is 40 miles away.

Wildlife is fundamental to the ranch. Owners must build their homes with that in mind. Wildlife-friendly fences are required and other strict building restrictions must be followed.

The ranch recently hosted a talk on living with wildlife coordinated with the Greater Yellowstone Coalition. About 100 people from the ranch and surrounding community attended. They received information on how to live with wildlife from keeping family dogs safe from wolves to storing food and trash so as not to entice bears as well as other tips.

About 3,000 to 4,000 elk pass through the ranch on the way to their winter range each year. The rest of Montana's wildlife residents are all here, too. Deer, wolves, coyote, fox, mountain lions and black and grizzly bears have all been sighted on the



property. Smelser and his dog surprised a full-racked moose one day and were chased to safety, which came in the form of a tractor. He has witnessed elk calving in the spring.

Conservation stewardship is an integral part of any Sun West Ranch initiative. A pond project to improve the wetland area on the property exceeded all the state reclamation requirements. Sand hill cranes, eagles, grouse already enjoy it. Canada geese hatch their young near the ranch's bridge over the Madison River. Three ponds have been created on the property. Gildred named one Esteban, which is Steve in Spanish.

The two men come to the ranch with interesting backgrounds. Gildred has built his fortune in real estate in San Diego, California. He and his wife Heidi are the largest landowners in the development. Gildred brings that pioneer spirit to this project and his life. Born in Mexico, his family immigrated to the United States when he was 15 years old. He only spoke Spanish. In the 1970s, he purchased Sun Ranch and sold it 15 years later to actor Steven Segal. He served as Ambassador to Argentina under the first Bush Administration. This year, he piloted the 75th anniversary of his father's "Spirit of Goodwill" flight from California to Ecuador with his two sons and Charles Lindbergh's grandson.

Smelser seems to have a wide array of talents. He was an Army major and served in Vietnam. For 12 years he was a fireman. Later, he and his wife managed property in Idaho. An artist, Smelser ended up working in a gallery where he says he was "bored to tears." A mutual friend introduced him to Gildred

and a friendship and working relationship ensued. Smelser's excitement for the land and the project permeate his explanation of the ranch. The fit seems perfect.

About 32 of the 55 home sites have been sold with the vast majority of buyers building second homes. The ranch is self-sufficient with garbage and snow plowing service and its own fire truck. Ranch staff monitor each house for any problems when the temperature dips below freezing in the winter. Sun West's seven-stall heated barn has an outdoor arena and round pen, tack room and shoeing area. Owners are responsible for the care of their animals.

Gildred strives for a community feeling. Buyers are diverse – heralding from New York City, Savannah, Georgia and even Norway and Switzerland; however, they are like-minded in their support of the land. "They want to get away and enjoy Montana and the river and mountains," Gildred said.

This past spring, Sun West was awarded *Mountain Living* magazine's Responsible Development Award. The honor is given to developers who follow specific criteria such as protection of natural lands, wildlife preservation and inclusion of historic architecture. Local and state governments and the Madison Valley Ranchlands group have also recognized Sun West for its approach.





One can't help but be lulled to inner peace gazing at the natural beauty around. "You see the land and it is absolutely beautiful," Smeber said. "This has been a subdivision for thousands of years and the impact has been minimal. I know our buildings last longer than tips, but we still want to develop the area in tune with nature. You can drive through this area and never know there are 55 home sites here. Ted is responsible for that."

Montana's land is fiercely protected by those who love it. Let's face it. Most hear the word developer and cringe. Although a relative newcomer in Montana terms, Gildred understands what is at stake. The ranch bills itself to buyers as "the life you promised yourself." Gildred also seems to be trying to keep a legacy for the future.

For more information, visit www.sunwestranch.com or call (800) 765-6908.

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— Kimberly Malinski is a freelance writer who contributes to regional and national magazines. Whenever possible, you can find her hiking the mountains of Montana or trying to fly-fish. She and her two young children recently went a bet with her husband as to who would catch the most fish. He's yet to pay up.

