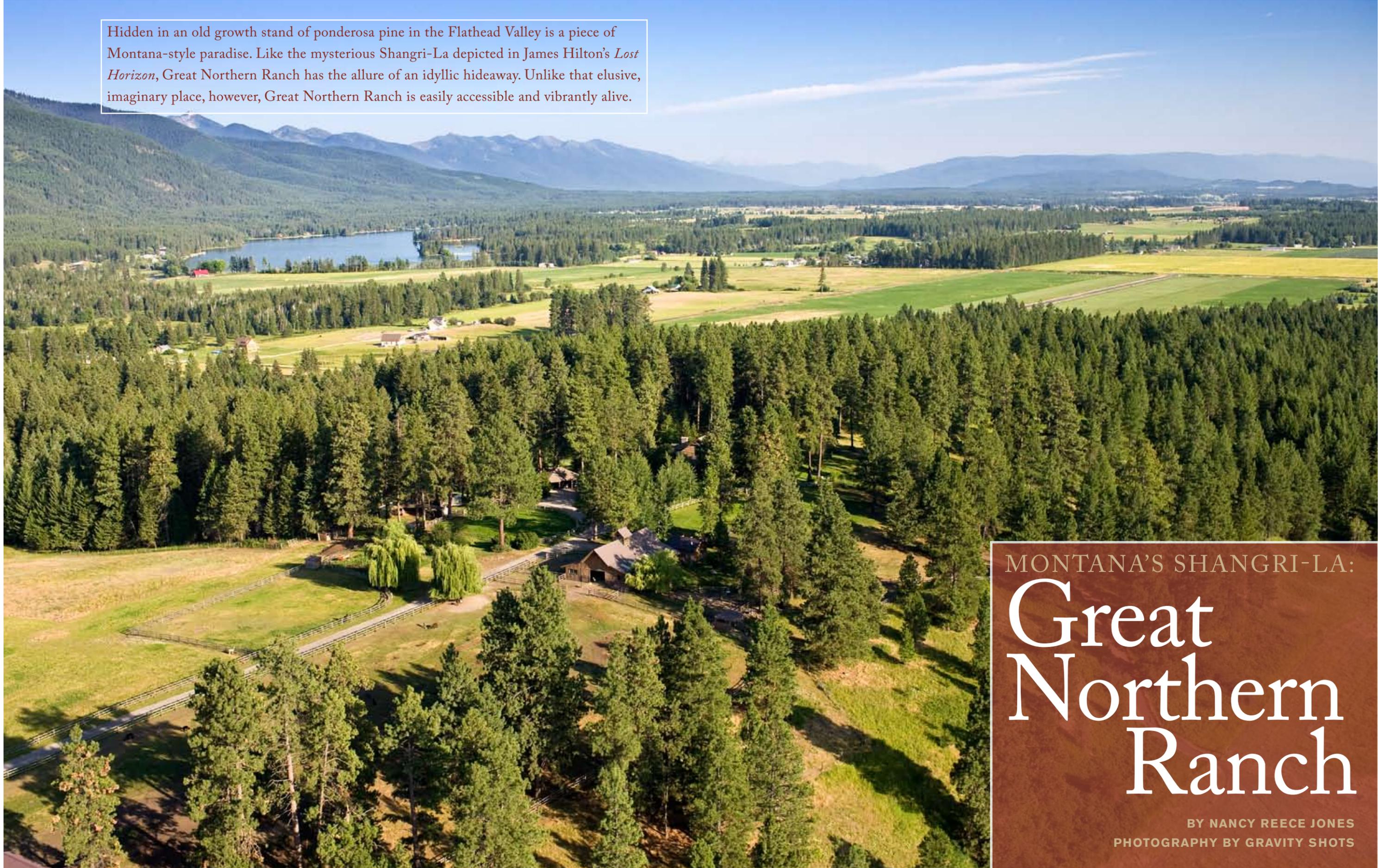


Hidden in an old growth stand of ponderosa pine in the Flathead Valley is a piece of Montana-style paradise. Like the mysterious Shangri-La depicted in James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, Great Northern Ranch has the allure of an idyllic hideaway. Unlike that elusive, imaginary place, however, Great Northern Ranch is easily accessible and vibrantly alive.



MONTANA'S SHANGRI-LA:
Great Northern Ranch
BY NANCY REECE JONES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY GRAVITY SHOTS

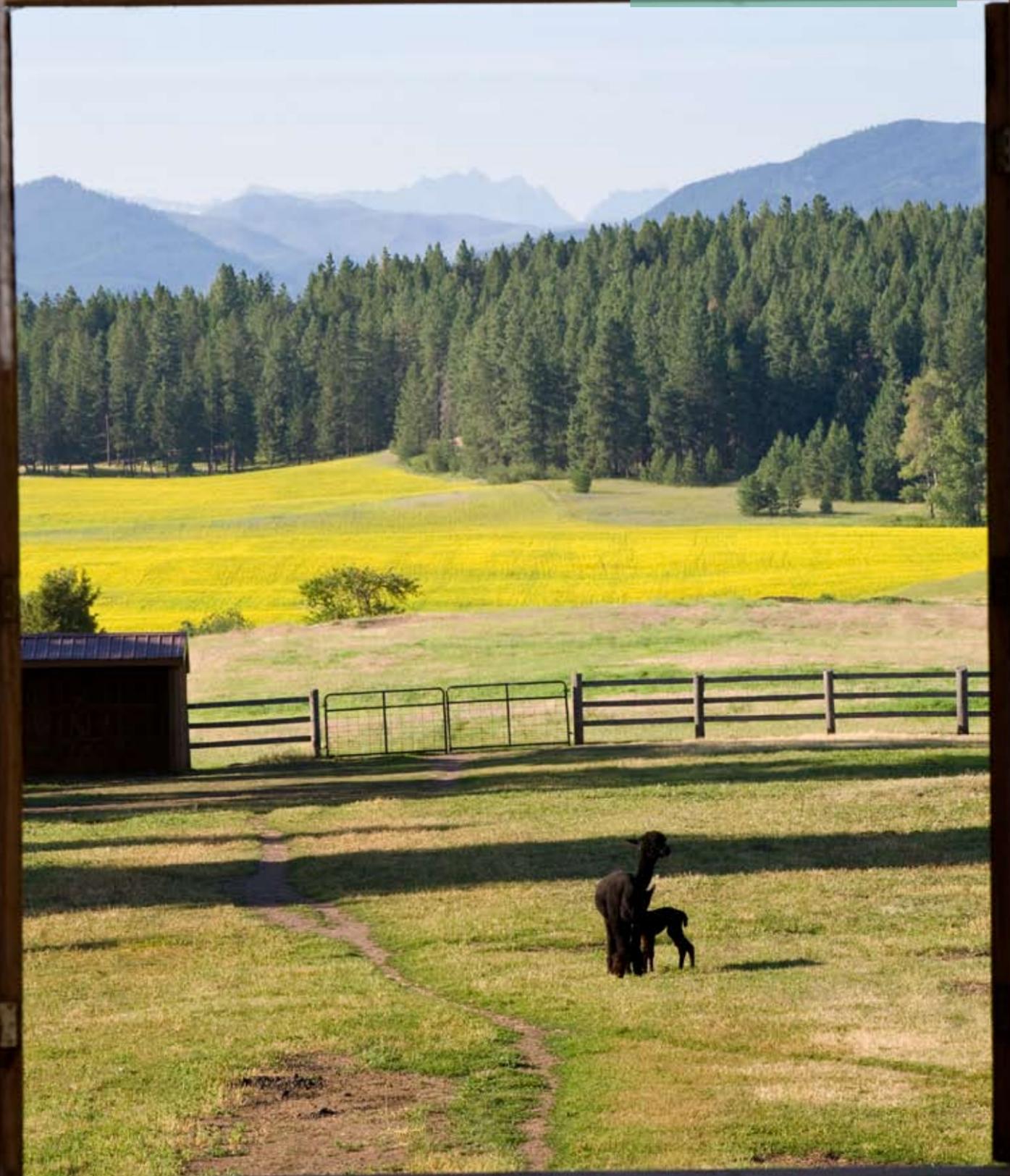
Owners Steve and Sue Rolfing have deep roots in the Flathead Valley. As a boy, Steve spent summers with his grandparents at their cabin on Flathead Lake. Being an active, contributing part of the community has long been a priority for the Rolfings. This spirit of belonging—to cultural as well as natural surroundings—is evident in all aspects of their lives, from the way they decorate their house to how they run their business.



Sue and Steve have the special gift of inclusion, of bringing others into their world.

Few can claim, as the Rolfings can, that they built their ranch on the backs of llamas. Actually, it was Steve's bum back that set in motion the series of events that culminated in the creation of their thriving llama and alpaca-based business. A young, dedicated outdoorsman and timber cruiser, Steve suffered a back injury in 1979 that threatened to curtail his livelihood and enjoyment of the mountains. Little did he and his wife realize then that the solution—a llama—would propel them into a deeply fulfilling and enviable lifestyle.

Able to neither ride a horse nor carry a heavy backpack, Steve welcomed a friend's suggestion to buy a llama to haul his surveying gear. He quickly recognized the potential of llamas, long used as beasts of burden in their native Andes, as the ideal pack animal for the Montana Rockies. "They make wonderful hiking companions," Steve explains. "They're so unobtrusive and quiet that you hardly notice they're with you." Sue adds, "It's like being followed by a 400-lb. pussy cat."



It wasn't long before the Rolfings, then living in Whitefish, became captivated by the docile creatures and began breeding them to sell and for their growing outfitter-guide business. Their passion for all things llama (and eventually alpaca as well) drew others to them. Whether taking families on peerless backcountry trips or educating new owners about the care and management of llamas, Sue and Steve became Montana's resident llama experts and most enthusiastic fans.

When the herd outgrew their first farm, serendipity and the livestock market conspired to enable the purchase of a splendid 230-acre property in rural Columbia Falls in 1991. By then, the popularity of llamas had soared, causing the demand for them to outstrip the supply. "We wanted to keep our herd at a size we could manage ourselves," Sue explains, "so we were willing to sell some of ours when others were not." The overheated market resulted in record sales for the Rolfings, including three of the highest priced males ever sold.

"So this is the house that three llamas built," Sue laughs. "We felt the best thing we could do with our windfall was to invest in something we could enjoy and share with family and friends; something to appreciate while it appreciates."

The entrance to their ranch says a lot about the Rolfings. No imposing log arch, just a small sign with the Great Northern Ranch logo—a whimsical take on the Great Northern Railway logo with its silhouetted mountain goat replaced by a llama. The meandering drive ascends through open pastures with a commanding view of the Swan Mountains to the east. As the gracious hand-crafted log home comes into view, it's easy to feel drawn in by the calm beauty of the setting.

The 4,000 sq-ft Adirondack-style house is reminiscent of the grand log



lodges built in nearby Glacier National Park and other western parks in the early 1900s. Its creation was a collaborative endeavor involving the Rolfings, brother-in-law and architect Jeff Balch, design engineers at Alpine Log Homes, and local contractor Tom LaChance. The result is a harmonious interplay of planes and natural materials that frames beautiful views in every direction.

What makes the house special, however, isn't just the deft workmanship and creative talent that went into its construction, but rather the sheer life force it embodies. It is the storefront, office, and command central for the Rolfings' successful ranching operation and their summer pack trips. Most importantly, it's where they raised two children—Kate, 26, and Jamie, 23. "We operate out of here 24/7," says Sue. "We've been so fortunate to have had the flexibility of a home-based business."

Everything about the ranch reflects a blend of Sue's artistic sensibilities and Steve's love of the outdoors. The effect is understated elegance with rustic overtones. In the spacious great room, for example, a Two Grey Hills Navajo rug hangs above the piano on one side of the room and a hammock is strung from the rafters on the other side. "It's hard to keep Steve inside, even in winter," chuckles Sue, "so we wanted to replicate the outdoors as best we could to make him more comfortable."

They are also surrounded by relics of their past. "Our house is a Rolfing family museum," Sue notes as she points out a juke box between the living and dining areas. "Both Steve's father and his grandfather worked for the Wurlitzer company," she explains, "so this has sentimental meaning for us." Next to the juke box is a rocking chair that her great-grandfather needlepointed. Artfully draped on it are

The 4,000 sq-ft Adirondack-style house is reminiscent of the grand log lodges built in nearby Glacier National Park and other western parks in the early 1900s.



a Peruvian llama pack acquired on one of Steve's trips to South America and a donkey pack that Jamie brought back from a recent medical mission in Afghanistan.

Displayed alongside family memorabilia is Sue's collection of paintings, sculpture, and pottery by Montana artists and craftsmen which began nearly 30 years ago during her term on the Hockaday Art Museum staff. A number of paintings and other objects are gifts from grateful clients inspired by pack trips, including a striking stained glass image of the Great Northern logo on the pantry door.

The landscaping is as tasteful and pleasing to the eye as the home. "Not too manicured," says Steve, "just enough to be attractive but wooly enough to blend into our woods." He selectively cleared the old growth ponderosa pine around the house to capture views and reduce its exposure to wildfire. Then he transplanted native vegetation from their acreage, creating a parked-out lawn dotted with accents of color and shade.

"We kept outbuildings to a minimum," Steve notes, "because we wanted to avoid the look of blocky dark spaces on our land." The house itself is tucked back into the trees partly in deference to others. "We didn't want to mar the view by building directly on

the exposed part of our knoll," he says, adding "we like having our ranch visually low profile." An unobtrusive, detached log carport replaces the traditional multi-car garage.

In many ways, the Roling's commitment to creating a property that is congruent with its surroundings is epitomized by their outdoor fireplace and dining area. The open-air, covered porch is a magnet for family and visitors alike. "We use this practically year-round," remarks Sue. "With the warmth of the fire we can eat dinner outside even in 30 to 40 degree weather. Steve and I can spend hours sipping red wine and toasting chunks of elk meat in the open flame."

The Rolings are well aware that part of the success of their llama business—both summer pack trips and selling their breeding stock—is the appeal of their lifestyle. Yet they do so unselfconsciously and naturally. Sue and Steve have the special gift of inclusion, of bringing others into their world. As Steve says, "We love facilitating experiences that people will fondly remember for the rest of their lives." Sue sums it up: "We've been richly blessed and want, in turn, to bless others, to positively impact their lives in a way that supports families and celebrates being Montanans."