This stewardship project was located in the Garfield Mountain Recommended Wilderness Area in the Lima Peaks. We worked with the folks out of the Dillon Ranger District to set up the project.

The fence we helped remove was between 0.25 to 0.5 miles long, and removing the fence helped to "re-wild" that recommended wilderness area.

Our agency partners had received information that animals were getting stuck in this barbed wire fence as they were having difficulty crossing it. The fence was a remnant of a retired grazing lease and was no longer needed for the area.

Many hands came together to tear this project down in one beautiful day. We gathered and staged all the materials (barbed wire fence; metal and wood fence posts; metal wire ties; and other recyclables) for a later pickup by the U.S. Forest Service helitak crew.

Our crew met at the Dillon Ranger Station to convoy to the trailhead where we camped for two nights. Delicious dinners were provided by MWA and prepared by Field Director Sally Cathey.

Volunteers ranged in age from young ladies in middle school to retirees. It's always great to get out and meet folks who love our public lands and are willing to put in sweat equity for the love of wild places.

I also wanted to mention that we had two volunteers I recruited from Boston. Joe and Peg Sestrich have been spending a few weeks each year in the Anaconda area hiking and skiing. They were on their way to Montana a couple days before the Garfield project, and they were happy to lend a hand.

(Top) Part of the work party is pictured removing the barbed wire fence that was causing problems for wildlife. (Below) The workers hike into the project.
Into the Snowcrest

by O. Alan Weltzien

Many local Montana ranges could bear this name, but only this gem in Southwest Montana owns it. Proposed for Wilderness in Senator Tester’s “Forest, Jobs, and Recreation Act” and recommended as wilderness by the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, the Snowcrest remains as unprotected as it is unprotected.

Spreading roughly north-south 35 or 40 miles southeast of Dillon, this range has long attracted me. I’ve day hiked, backpacked, even trail run there on one long-ago summer day.

As far as I recall, there’s never been an MWA Wilderness Walk into the Snowcrest, but we changed that on the last Sunday of this past August. Eight hikers gathered with Assistant Leader Neal Straus and myself at a University of Montana Western parking lot so that we could carpool. Happily for me, many of these hikers have walked with me on previous Wilderness Walks: clearly, folks in Helena or Bozeman, for instance, want to explore our southwestern wildlands.

And we gathered to hike despite the endless wildfires smoke. As we drove up the Blacktail (Blacktail Deer Creek) and gained elevation, pockets of pine gradually appeared. Driving up the spur road to Antone Guard Station, we threaded along a drainage and passed through patches of mixed forest between rolling sagebrush prairie. At the parking area before the gated fence, grasses stretched a yard tall.

Though not a long hike, we would gain over 2,500 feet to summit Antone Peak (10,247 feet). For me, this felt like a return since this peak, on the southwest edge of the Snowcrest, I first climbed over 20 years ago—my first trip into the Snowcrest, in fact. Even as we started hiking beyond the Guard Station, the air felt clearer. At least, looking up, we saw blue sky which I could barely see in Dillon.

After a bit of cross-country we locked on the old trail that winds high above the drainage and gentles onto Antone Pass, a broad open meadow of cured grasses. We’d passed through stands of healthy lodgepole and spruce as well as ghost forest. As always, I kept my eye on the summit ridge looming close above, always planning our best route.

From the Pass we edged along trees, following the old trail southeast then northeast. Rising steadily up one long meadow, we found and followed the trail at its top, side hilling below the summit ridge. At a sharp bend the group paused, three or four opting for lunch and a leisurely sit before slowly retracing their steps. I told them to hang out there, as I didn’t know exactly when we would reach them again.

Unsurprisingly, they tired of waiting and started down. Plans don’t always work out. A few hours later we spotted three hikers most of the way back down to the Guard Station. I led the remainder on steep switchbacks as we angled northeast to gain the summit ridge. Of course we spread out, each pausing to breathe and blow as needed. Once I gained the knob atop the ridge I pointed my boots south and up: a final quarter mile, threading through only a couple of rock sections. Gradually the others joined me on Antone Peak’s summit, where they happily sat and snacked.

It felt great, standing again where I’d stood as a younger man. I pointed out details of the Snowcrest to the others: the peaks immediately northeast: Sunset and Olson Peaks, Hoggback and Sliderock Mountains just beyond, Honeymoon Park and Stonehouse Mountain and that fabulous trail that stays high, following open ridges, north-south, for miles at 9,000 feet.

We peered into the Centennial Valley, traced the shoreline of Lima Reservoir, but could not make out the Red Rock Lakes. Nor could we penetrate the Gravelly or the Madison Range, or look back northwest over the Beaverhead Valley and beyond.

I estimated visibility at 15 miles. That’s probably too generous. But above 10,000 feet we knew the right color of the sky, and I never get over my pleasure in looking down drainages and tracing further routes along nearby crests.

In retrospect, we could have descended more quickly had we retraced our ascent route. But I led down the close spur ridge which featured a couple big sections, moderate angled, of loose rock, which slowed us down before reaching the lower–angle grass. Instructing the others to descend steadily, I dropped down to our original rendezvous site only to find the others in the group long gone. Rejoining the others, we followed our ascent route and at the Pass, I waited for one hiker while the others followed the gradual trail down.

Back at the parking area, the group finally reunited, we hydrated and compared notes. I believe everyone really enjoyed their first walk into the Snowcrest, those who didn’t summit as much as those who did. After the long drive back into Dillon, at the Beaverhead Brewing Company, most of us raised our glasses and toasted a fine day. The kind of day that, despite the endless pall of smoke, reminds us why we live where we do and what we deeply love.

“The after a bit of cross-country we locked on the old trail that winds high above the drainage and gentles onto Antone Pass, a broad open meadow of cured grass.”
Hiking to Blair Lake in the Centennial Mountains

by Kelly Hurston

On Saturday, August 19, 2017, an intrepid group of women (not by design, the only male who planned on coming was way-laid by car trouble!) embarked upon an adventure in the remote southwest corner of Montana. The goal: Blair Lake in the Centennial Mountains situated at 8,100 feet along the Continental Divide Trail (CDT).

The Centennials run east to west along the Montana-Idaho border and are anchored on the north by Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. You may enter from the west side off of I-15 at Monida, or the east side off of U.S. Highway 20 by Henry’s Lake.

The day was ideal, warm and as clear as possible despite smoke from rampant wildfires throughout the west. Thankfully, no fires were in the immediate vicinity and the flora was surprisingly green for August, probably due to the northern exposure and plentiful streams. This same aspect can contribute to the trail being inaccessible well into July following big snow years. Most participants camped the night before at the Upper Lake Campground, which was busy due to the full solar eclipse about to occur three days later.

Four miles east of the eastern boundary of Red Rocks National Wildlife Refuge and about seven miles west of Henry’s Lake is a unique landmark of the narrow Hell Roaring Creek Canyon, a cliff band rising abruptly out of the flat valley floor south of the road.

Two trailheads are accessed by a very innocuous gate and cattle guard through private property (please be respectful or the black angus cattle will have their way with your vehicle). The trail starts on a gentle two-track pasture road that ends at a gate near Corral Creek. Through this gate is the first tricky point, veer to the left and start climbing immediately, staying on the left side of the creek. It was fairly overgrown, so we flagged a couple of key spots with orange flagging in case we got separated. The trail goes through thick timber and across numerous small streams, so long pants or gators are recommended.

After cresting the first large ridge, there is an important intersection with the trail that rises out of Hell Roaring Creek. Unfortunately, the sign had fallen with the mighty tree near it. Here we were rewarded with great views of Nemesis and Red Rock Mountains, plus Mount Jefferson to the southeast. Mount Jefferson is the name of the USGS quad map region for reference.

We continued straight across a lovely meadow, descended across streams, near potholes and then started to climb again. Once at about eye-level with these peaks, the trail forks again offering the option to proceed straight to Lillian Lake or begin the switchbacks to the right to Blair Lake.

Near the Lake, the trail splits again where CDT has been re-routed to the left and above. Stay right and follow the now naked sign posts of the former CDT to access the north-west shore of Blair Lake.

Blair Lake is surrounded on the south by a scree slide and high ridge while the north meadow is very pastoral. It was a perfect spot to rest with our picnic lunch and watch the fish jumping. Retracing our steps, we returned to the car around 4:00 p.m., taking our time on the steep descents and stopping to admire wildflowers and a downed tree with a whole series of bear claw marks.

Rather than re-write the entire trail description, I highly recommend using this very helpful blog which we found extremely useful in way-finding.
New Wilderness Chapter Jumps Into Stewardship

by Charlie O’Leary

A good number of members from the Southwestern Wildlands Chapter started this spring getting the necessary certifications and training for doing stewardship and other projects on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest.

Five got their chainsaw training for bucking and limbing by attending one classroom session with Pintler District Recreation Manager Will Shoutis and a very snowy field day east of Deer Lodge with Wade Murphy of the Upper Clark Fork Back Country Horsemen.

One Southwestern chapter member got certified as a crosscut sawyer. More members got their First aid/CPR certification from attending classes through various opportunities. Some of these same folks went through a horse safety course provided by Upper Clark Fork Back Country Horsemen in mid-May.

With the proper training behind us, we went to work on numerous projects. Jocelyn Dodge, Recreation Forester for the Butte Ranger District, requested some help on National Trails Day (June 3) to clear downfall on a loop trail in Thompson Park.

Later she asked if we could spray some knotweed on the Continental Divide Trail going both directions from Homestake Pass. Four of us covered about two miles of trail.

Later in June three of us rode up the Elkhorn Creek trail south of the Coolidge Ghost Town to clear trail. This was also a recon ride for a Wilderness Walk that was to happen the following week.

Jocelyn called again in July to see if we could do some pack support for an AmeriCorps crew that was chainsawing their way north-east from Cottonwood Lake north of Butte.

Their camping equipment needed to come back to the Butte Ranger District, so we were able to free up the sawyers to do more work on the ground.

In August we got an interesting call from the Wise River Recreation Forester, John Ericson. Some technicians from the Great Lakes Environmental Center needed to get packed into Mystic Lake (Anaconda Pintler Wilderness) to take water samples as part of some long range water quality study.

We loaded up their equipment, which was everything from ice blocks to water testing equipment to a boat on one pack horse and our saddle horses. The technicians had to walk. It was a 14-hour deal which included some heavy rain and lightning and a bear, but was very rewarding to help these guys out.

Four of us finished off the season clearing logs from the Chub Creek trail which takes off westerly from Seymour Creek, goes past the old miner cabins of John Soderback and up to the Anaconda Pintler boundary on its way to the East Fork of LaMarche Creek.

As you can see, the opportunities to get your hands dirty on stewardship projects and packing support are many and are always rewarding if done safely.

If this appeals to you as a member and would like to volunteer in 2018 please let us know.
Heading to Coolidge Ghost Town and Elkhorn Lake

by Callie Boyle

We were worried about the snow. June 24th might be past midsummer on the Gregorian calendar, but time moves different in the Montana mountains and in the high places, winter clings stubbornly on.

We had 14 people scheduled to hike with us through Coolidge ghost town, following us up to Elkhorn Lake. That’s a 12-mile hike with considerable elevation gain; snow wasn’t going to make it any easier.

So, the weekend before, we loaded up the horses and went to see for ourselves. Was the trail clear? Washed away? Buried beneath snow?

All of the above, as it turned out. We picked our way through those 12 miles, blazing trees and moving downed timber, finding snow but not a lot of it, the trail more or less intact. We urged the horses across the roaring creek and then left them to rest and munch grass while we continued on foot up along the mountain.

Finally, our reward—we went up and up until we pushed through the branches and found ourselves on the lake shore with the mountains offered up to us, towering snow-capped peaks reaching up into the blue sky, looking like God’s cathedral, made by His own hand.

We are so lucky, I thought, as I always do in the mountains. I couldn’t wait to lead the hike, to bring friends and family and strangers to see it, this treasure right in own backyard.

The next weekend, we all met in the parking area of Coolidge ghost town, the mood excited, happy. The weather couldn’t have been more beautiful, nothing but blue skies and a hot summer sun. Ice dripped from lichen-covered branches while mosquitoes buzzed around us, like the seasons were duking it out over which would rule the day.

We started at a good pace, down the path alongside the rushing creek until the forest opened up and Coolidge ghost town appeared amongst the trees.

We didn’t linger, knowing the hike still ahead of us, but we made time to take pictures and explore the remnants of the town that was slowly being reabsorbed into the forest. Coolidge isn’t like Bannack or Virginia City; here we’re just pressing our faces into the window of history and can only watch as time takes apart what man has made and scatters it back into the dirt. Only a few structures still remain, but the imagination fills in the blanks.

One can’t help but see the town for what it once was, bustling and brave, forging a life so far back into the mountains. Even today, the isolation feels shocking.

Up and up we go.

We follow the creek, winding deeper through the forest. We stop to nibble on Glacier lilies, to marvel at the view. There is no cell phone service, but we take our phones out frequently, snapping pictures to share with friends back home.

We meet a few other hikers and everyone greets each other like old friends. We exchange smiles, do the Montana thing where everyone lists their relatives so that connections can be made. We’re all glad to be here until this great blue sky, filling our lungs with mountain air. Sunshine beats down on our backs, and we’re all so grateful for it.

Forgive me for the romanticizing. The mountains do that to me.

The mosquitoes become less of a bother the higher we go, and then we get to the snow drifts, the ones I was so worried about.

A week of sunshine has whit-tled them down, and there’s just enough left for a quick snowball fight before we cross the creek.

We clasp hands, and make a chain to cross Elkhorn creek, which is swollen from all that melted snow.

Now for the last big push, up the mountain to the lake that’s waiting for us. We go slow, weaving along the switchbacks and following the blazes we made the week before.

We’re all sweaty and out of breath when we finally make it to the lake, but still we stand and stare, taking in the crystal lake, the towering mountains. It’s like a postcard, something seen in a movie. No cell phone photo can do it justice.

We take our time at the lake, having lunch, exploring, a little fishing. Other hikers make their way up and they stop and stare too. Beautiful, everyone says. Just, beautiful.

We head back. The conversations take on different tones. We share favorite hikes we’ve been on, the mountains we still want to climb. We talk about next summer and about doing this again, the friends we want to bring with us so that they too can have this experience.

Back at the car, we exchange phone numbers and Facebook profiles and warm hugs. No one is in any hurry for the day to end, and we sit on the tailgates of our trucks, on the bumpers of our cars and let the afternoon stretch out.

A few latecomers arrive and wave to us as they start up the trail. I’m glad to see so many people. This belongs to all of us, that lake. These mountains. Anyone can drive here, hike the trail and have their breath taken away.

Finally, it’s time to go. Next summer, we promise each other. We’ll see you again next summer, back on the trail.
!! SAVE THE DATES !!

Winter Wildland Film Festival

More Info Coming Soon!

Dillon
Saturday, Jan. 27, 2018

Location:
Patagonia
16 S. Idaho Street

Doors Open:
6:30 p.m.

Films Start:
7:00 p.m.

Butte
Friday, Feb. 23, 2018

Location:
5518 Designs
27 N. Main Street

Doors Open:
6:30 p.m.

Films Start:
7:00 p.m.

Elkhorn Lake in the East Pioneer Recommended Wilderness Area.

Chapter Officers
Fran Galvin, President
Rick Douglass, Vice-President
Jill Kolb, Chapter Rep.
Travis McAdam, Treasurer
<Vacant>, Secretary

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