by Travis McAdam

Just like everyone else, the COVID pandemic caught the members of the Southwestern Wildlands Chapter by surprise in 2020 and made the year unfold much differently than anticipated.

Suddenly our plans for stewardship projects and leading hikes were put on hold. However, like many MWA members, we found solace and social distancing in our state’s wide-open spaces, either in locations we return to often or in exploring places that soon became new favorites.

We decided to dedicate this newsletter to the beautiful places where we spent time during the pandemic, which helped bring a sense of normalcy to trying times. We hope you enjoy the following articles and photos!
Visiting the Ruby Mountains WSA and Pioneers

by Karen Meyer

It was an excellent spring and summer to get out into the wild.

On April 9, I saw my first wildflowers of the year. They were up near the Point of Rocks south of Whitehall above the Jefferson River. The narrow trail climbed steeply to above the rock outcroppings where there was a view of many mountain ranges in the distance and the valley below. The quickest decent was straight down a ravine dodging bushes.

On April 29, Mike (Sullivan) and I drove to the Ruby Mountains WSA. We took the road west outside of Alder to Laurin Canyon. We found a nice campsite before the WSA began. The view was expansive with the snowy Tobacco Root Mountains to the north, the wildernesses to the east, and a sky full of stars. The trail is an old road winding through fir forest with rock formations and outcrops. We eventually stopped when we ran into snow.

My favorite hike of the year was on July 17. It was a four-mile loop in the Pioneers over varied terrain. The trail starts on a road south of Boulder Creek Campground on the east side of the Pioneer Mountains Scenic Byway. The trail is steep and strenuous, but it's a fun hike over to Fourth of July Creek (tr#2754) and then back over to and down Boulder Creek (tr# 2117). The trail disappeared several times on the ridge and through a dead forest. There were many flowers along the way, among them Lupine, Indian Paintbrush, and a small marsh full of Elephant Head. The bank of Boulder Creek was lined with Columbine.

Boulder Mountain from the Boulder Creek trail in the Pioneer Mountains.

(Right) Elephant Head found along the Fourth of July Creek trail in the Pioneer Mountains.

(Left) Hooker’s Townsend Daisies found on the Point of Rocks near Whitehall.
For the past few summers, I stretch beyond my local mountain ranges in southwest Montana and explore the Scapegoat or the Bob. Like all of you, in the past three seasons—which have felt like three years—I find even more solace and uplift in the mountains because there is no pandemic and no news, political or otherwise. Instead, one finds the old news of rock and the fresh news of bugling bulls or raptors cruising currents.

I backpack with Scott Friskics of Great Falls, former president of the MWA State Council who has hiked the Rocky Mountain Front for decades. His feet know most of the trails, and he’s been an excellent guide and friend at Scapegoat Mountain or along the North Wall in the Bob.

For six days this mid-September, we traced, clockwise, a 72-mile loop that took me, on the third day, to the Chinese Wall. Most of the first four days we hiked the CDT. For all my hiking and climbing in Montana, I still hadn’t been to the most famous icon of Montana’s most famous wilderness area. We began our trek in wildfire smoke; by the fifth day, we walked through some rain and by the sixth, along the North then South Forks of the Sun River, we were treated to clear, early autumn weather.

The first two days, three or four parties passed us, returning to the Benchmark trailhead. On Friday morning, our third day, Scott and I reached the southern end of the Chinese Wall. Though visibility was compromised 6-8 miles out, along the base of the Wall, in morning sun, everything sparkled. We studied the ramparts and columns looming above us, blue sky above. And we hiked, northbound, as though the Wall were entirely for us. No horse packers, no other backpackers. We saw no one until Gates Park, the evening of the fourth day.

Now I understand. And as pandemic conditions have worsened in Big Sky Country, I sometimes pause and call forth images of the Wall that Friday. I also pull images of those big, endless meadows along the North and South Forks of Sun River, tawny in Indian summer. As always in Montana backcountry, there is so much to love.

Alan Weltzien pictured at the south end of the Chinese Wall on the morning of a mid-September day.

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2020 Brass Lantern Award Winner:
Chapter Board Member Roger Gordon

Roger Gordon, a Southwestern Wildlands Chapter board member, was awarded one of the Montana Wilderness Association’s Brass Lantern Awards at the virtual Wildfest held on October 24, 2020. Roger has been active with the local chapter board since its inception in the summer of 2016.

He is an active member of the local chapter trail crew, as well as working on state trail projects. Roger helps out, whether it’s weed spraying, using his crosscut saw, or swinging a Pulaski. He just loves being outdoors.

Thank you, Roger, for your hard work and dedication to KEEPING MONTANA WILD.
Pioneers Trail Clearing, Spraying Weeds in the Humbug Spires

by Charlie O’Leary

Due to the Coronavirus, the members of the stewardship team for the Southwestern Wildlands were severely limited in our ability to schedule official trail clearing projects with the USFS this year. We did have a spray day with the local BLM folks to continue our work along the Humbug Spires trails starting from two trailheads, Divide and Moose Creek. BLM weed coordinator Lacy Decker provided seven of us with backpacks and chemical to attack these noxious invaders.

In the fall, three of us did an unofficial project up Canyon Creek in the East Pioneers. This trail leads to Canyon, Crescent, and Abundance Lakes, all popular spots for hikers and horsemen. The parking lot was almost full due to a lot of folks going stir crazy with the inability to gather with friends in town. We had a hard time turning around with the horse trailer but finally were able to get situated and unload our trusty mounts.

Within a mile from the trailhead, we started to encounter a number of large beetle killed Lodgepole Pines across the route. We didn’t expect to encounter the sheer number that we found. With only one gassed up chainsaw hanging on the saddle horn in a leather scabbard, we were destined to run out before the job was done. We continued on with a crosscut saw until we ran out of light.

Satisfied with the day, we retired to a grassy meadow, unsaddled and hobbled the horses, started a small fire, cooked some elk steaks, potatoes, and onions, and washed it down with some Montana micro-brew. A nice ending to a fulfilling day’s work.

We chose this particular area to work on because the Montana Wilderness Association stewardship crew (Matt Bowser and Sonny Mazzullo) will be doing a major project by the lakes next summer. The project was funded in part by a Resource Advisory Committee (RAC) grant that MWA was successful in securing last spring. They also got a grant for a project in the Snow Crest Range, so there are a couple of fun trail projects that you can volunteer for next summer. Each project will be multiple days in beautiful Montana landscapes.
Hiking in the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness and the Bitterroot

By Sherry Vogel

We are fortunate that seeking solitude is not hard in southwest Montana. I took full advantage of that in my quest for places to enjoy the outdoors this year by revisiting favorite haunts and finding places new to me.

Spring time in the Bitterroots is wet and wild. A hike in the Little Rock Creek drainage was prolific with Calypso Orchids. Another hike that was new to me started from the Carp Lake trailhead leading to Cutaway Pass.

The trail led to a high rocky ridge that afforded impressive views of the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness. Along the trail, high in the alpine, Parry’s Primrose towered above the cushion plants, a standout in the native plant community. An early July hike in the Lima Peaks provided just the solitude we were all searching for this summer. This area in southwest Montana is rarely visited.

An early October trek to the top of Mount Evans, also in the Anaconda Range, provided vistas with Alpine Larch in full yellow attire. It doesn’t get better than that, well, maybe next time less snow would be better.

There was no solitude in Glacier Park this summer, but the alpine landscape, ravaged by ice, never ceases to impress. Now the skis are out and the high peaks are just a snowy vision.

Coming Soon to Your Home Theater!

MWA to Virtually Host
Winter Wildlands Alliance Backcountry Film Festival

(Above) The view from Cutaway Pass in the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness. (Below) Along the trail to Cutaway Pass, Parry’s Primrose towered above the cushion plants.

This virtual event will be streamed between January 28, 2021, and February 18, 2021.

Cost is $10 for a single and $20 for group viewing.

Look for emails and Facebook posts coming out soon!

For more information, contact Jill at jchefjill@gmail.com
Hiking to Haystack Peak

by Kriss Douglass

Three adventurous MWA members joined the hike to Haystack Peak with chapter board members Kriss and Rick Douglass. Mary Clark and another couple drove from Helena and joined us. As we started up the trail, a group of runners passed us coming down, and then a couple of mountain bikers bounced passed. We weren’t the only ones enjoying this not so out-of-the-way wilderness.

The day was summer-perfect, bright blue sky, no bugs to speak of, lots of wild flowers, and a heavenly-shaded trail. The trail was steeper and rougher than I had remembered. There are several pitches that seem to go straight up the fall line and are very rocky and woven with forest roots. I took several terrible flower pictures of Pyrola, White Geranium, and shrubby Penstemon. Surprising to me, we saw a five-needle pine. Is it Whitebark? Limber? I don’t know how to identify a seven-inch tall specimen, but it was the catch-of-the-day.

I did not make it to the peak, but others did. They reported the scenery was spectacular. We had a marvelous day on the trail, fresh mountain air, views of Montana in every direction, and marvelous company to share.

2020 Trail Crew Volunteer of the Year:
Chapter Member Julia Clark

Julia Clark, a member of the Southwestern Wildlands Chapter, was named the 2020 Trail Crew Volunteer of the Year by MWA. Julia volunteered in three Volunteer Trail Crew projects:

◊ Pintler Creek in the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness where she helped clear and maintain the Continental Divide Trail between Elk Park and Pintler Pass. She logged 48 volunteer hours on this project.

◊ Flesher Pass outside Lincoln where she helped construct a re-route and installed drainage features on the Continental Divide Trail. She logged 32 volunteer hours on this project.

◊ Sluice Boxes State Park outside Great Falls where she helped with brushing, retread and drainage work on the Belt Creek Trail in the park’s southern reach. She logged 24 volunteer hours on this project.

Julia also volunteered with MWA for a day performing Wilderness Study Area Character Monitoring in southwest Montana. Congratulations to Julia for being recognized for an incredible amount of trail work this year!
More Photos from Our Southwestern Chapter

Karen Meyer (foreground) and Mike Sullivan clearing cross-country ski trails at Moulton Reservoir.

Some covered rock in the Ruby Mountains WSA.

The view from Mount Evans in the Anaconda Range.
Chapter’s Calendar of Events

- January 21, 2021: Chapter Board Meeting: 5:30-7:30 p.m. (Virtual Event)
- January 28, 2021: Winter Wildlands Alliance Film Festival Kickoff
- February 18, 2021: Chapter Board Meeting: 5:30-7:30 p.m. (Virtual Event)
- March 18, 2021: Chapter Board Meeting: 5:30-7:30 p.m. (Virtual Event)
- April 15, 2021: Chapter Board Meeting: 5:30-7:30 p.m. (Virtual Event)
- April 22, 2021: Earth Day: The theme for 2021 is “Restoring the Earth.” Stay tuned for more information
- May 20, 2021: Chapter Board Meeting: 5:30-7:30 p.m. (Virtual Event)
- June 5, 2021: National Trails Day. Stay tuned for more information
- Late Summer or early Fall: Fifth Anniversary Celebration of the Southwestern Wildlands Chapter. More information coming this summer.

If you are a member and would like to attend a virtual chapter board meeting, please email Jill Kolb, (ichefjill@gmail.com) SWWC Rep., at least 3 days prior to the date with your name, email address, and phone number.