A Word from the President

CHARLIE O’LEARY
Southwestern Wildlands Chapter president

Montana has 52,000 square miles of pure adventure public lands but most of us will never hike, ride, ski, or snowshoe a quarter of that in a lifetime. Here in southwest Montana, we have more than our fair share of exciting rivers, shining mountains, high elevation lakes, and deep quiet forest lands. We have an abundance of wild creatures from all the large mammals and ferocious carnivores, to those smaller but always entertaining critters like badgers, marmots, and pikas. Avian species abound. We are always in awe when we hear the calling of the great sandhill cranes high above as they wing their way south for winter. It’s hard to find the right words to describe how fortunate we are to be surrounded by so much wildness. As the late troubadour Walkin’ Jim Stoltz would sing, “Let it stay forever wild.”

Southwestern Wildlands Chapter Annual Meeting

Dec. 9, 2021 at 6:30 p.m. via Zoom

Join the Southwestern Wildlands Chapter on Dec. 9, 2021, at 6:30 p.m. for our fifth annual member meeting, followed by a special guest presentation by Deborah and Greg Schatz.

Deborah and Greg traveled to the Darkhad Valley in Mongolia to exchange horse packing techniques with local herders. They returned to the area in 2018 to continue their partnership with the locals, helping them diversify their income by starting an outfitting business.

Join this Zoom presentation with Deborah and Greg to get a glimpse of traditional nomadic life in Mongolia and see the progress they have made toward expanding their local economy.

Register to attend at wildmontana.org/swc/events.
The Southwestern Wildlands Chapter lost a valuable member on July 25, 2021. William “Bill” Clark passed away at Community Hospital of Anaconda from a medical complication. He was 65 years old. Bill was an avid outdoorsman and a defender of the environment.

Bill was an active member of Wild Montana’s Southwestern Wildlands Chapter since 2015. He served on the SWC Board of Directors, the public lands stewardship team, and just about anything else that needed to be done. Bill led many Wilderness Walks for the Southwestern Wildlands Chapter, and his hearty laugh and generous spirit added so much to our chapter’s activities.

Bill’s outgoing and lovable personality served as an inspiration to those of us who had the pleasure of knowing him. His dedication to our work for wild country was contagious and motivating to others around him on any project. There was never any doubt in his mind about how to tackle the task before him, and others just naturally followed his lead.

He could be found running a chainsaw on a trail project one day and a week later debating the value of wilderness study areas with a U.S. senator! Bill received the Wild Montana Brass Lantern Award posthumously in September 2021. He loved Montana’s outdoor quiet places with everything he had. He will be sadly missed by the members of Southwestern Wildlands Chapter.
Teams split up amongst the various sites along the river. My family and I started our clean-up at Dewey, where we found a disheartening number of cigarette butts and beer cans discarded along the riverbank, but no significant amount of trash.

Moving back toward Divide, we stopped at several other sites, removing more cigarette butts and beer cans, but also cardboard and clothing and, oddly enough, a set of pillows. Several teams rendezvoused at Brownes Bridge and sawyer Mike Sullivan went to work cutting up some of the larger deadfall that had accumulated over the winter. Other volunteers picked up litter and cleaned ashes from the fire pits.

By the end of the day, volunteers had cleaned trash, removed ash, and cleared trees from 10 sites along the Big Hole: Dewey, Greenwood Bottoms, Powerhouse, Divide Bridge, Maiden Rock, Salmon Fly, Brownes Bridge, Kalsta Bridge, Glen and Notch Bottom. In fact, so much trash was collected that volunteers made several trips to the Glen and Triangle Gulch Transfer dumps before gathering for a barbecue dinner at the Salmon Fly Fishing Access Site in Melrose, courtesy of Rick and Kriss Douglass.
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Wild Montana member and Southwestern Wildlands Chapter volunteer, Tom Richardson, is the project manager for the Montana-Wyoming Girl Scout Council’s Castle Rock Camp just south of Butte. The camp, which was dedicated in the late 1920s by Mrs. Herbert Hoover, is situated along one of the upper reaches of Little Basin Creek. The wet moose meadow, camp lodge, and multiple cabins are surrounded by a rich fir, spruce, and lodgepole pine forest, some of which got hit hard over the last 15 years by the lodgepole pine beetle.

A trail leads south from the camp onto the national forest and up to the historic Stimac Homestead, a structure that is protected by the Antiquities Act of 1906. The mile-long hike has always been a popular outing for hundreds of Girl Scouts for decades. With the recent pine beetle infestation, most of the lodgepole pine along the trail have died and so many have fallen across the trail that it could no longer be traveled safely or easily by young campers.

Richardson and the Southwestern Wildlands Chapter stewardship crew thought clearing the trail for a National Trails Day project would be a great public service that would further our goal of getting young people into the out of doors. We did a reconnaissance hike with the local U.S. Forest Service ranger who approved our work on his part of the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest.

So on June 5 this spring, 15 members gathered at the camp – armed with chainsaws, helmets, gloves, and lots of water – and went to work. The sawyers spread out along the trail while others moved cut logs or loaded them into trucks. We all celebrated with a big feed at day’s end, along with the knowledge that young Girl Scout campers from across Montana and Wyoming could, once again, enjoy a cool shady hike up to a piece of Montana’s not-so-recent history.
Vote for Our 2021 SW Wildlands Chapter’s Board of Director Candidates

Please vote for our board nominees, who will serve for a three-year term beginning on Jan. 1, 2022. Cast your vote at wildmontana.org/swc.

Callie Boyle is a Montanan who grew up in Butte and spent her summers on the Big Hole River. From childhood, she loved the mountains and that inspired her to attend Montana Tech, earning a Master’s Degree in Biology. She is a longtime volunteer for the Clark Fork Watershed Education Program, has worked for Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, and is a sever-al-year member of Wild Montana. She enjoys horseback riding and hiking in Montana’s beautiful mountains with her husband and son. She is a leader in the Wilderness Walks program and a certified sawyer for our trail crew. Callie is a certified teacher and works within the Butte School District.

Alan Weltzien, Professor of English, Emeritus, UMW Dillon, has been a hiker, climber, and skier in southwest Montana and beyond for many years. A member of Wild Montana for over 20 years. Weltzien served on the MWA/Wild Montana State Council for 5 years. He has led Wilderness Walks for many summers. Alan knows that southwest Montana’s basin and range country contains many lifetimes of beautiful locations.

Jill Kolb is originally from Wisconsin. She moved to Montana in 1987 to attend MSU where she earned a B.S. in Agriculture Business. Jill first fell in love with wildlands on a hike in the Indian Peaks Wilderness Area in Colorado. She joined and helped start the Southwestern Wildlands Chapter in 2016. She has served as the Chapter Rep since 2016.

Rick Douglass was raised in Salt Lake City and received his BS and MS in Zoology and Biology from the University of Utah. His interest in the outdoors was stimulated by hunting, hiking, and backpacking in his native state. Rick went on to MSU to earn his Ph.D. in Zoology, working in small mammal ecology. Rick spent 10 years conducting ecological monitoring in remote areas of the Canadian and Alaskan arctic and the Piceance Basin in Colorado. Rick, Professor of Biology, Emeritus, UMT, Butte taught Biology for 33 years. In his free time, he enjoys hiking, hunting, backpacking, and cooking for trail crews in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. He is a certified sawyer for our trail crew and has served as Vice President for the chapter.
Four Horses, Three Riders, Two Nights

O. ALAN WELTZIEN
Southwestern Wildlands Chapter member

Charlie O'Leary, a longtime horseman in Butte, said, “We'll make a cowboy out of you yet.” I wore a sun hoodie and sneakers which made his claim dubious.

Charlie had been trying to get me atop a horse for a long time. He and Callie Boyle, able horsewoman, invited me to join them for two days and nights in the Snowcrest Range at the end of June 2021. I know the Snowcrests from past backpacks, day hikes, even my first and last trail run; I don’t know horses that well and shaved off bits of my ignorance on this trip. I was broken in.

Late one afternoon I met Charlie and Callie in a flat just below Three Forks Cow Camp, well up the Upper Ruby River valley and miles beyond the U.S. Forest Service Cottonwood Camp. I recalled a long-ago climb up Sliderock Mountain, which we’d spend the next two days circling. Charlie’s three horses and Callie’s horse grazed and watered in the river. At one point I looked up to watch the quartet across the river start ambling north, Charlie splashing after them. He said, “They might think they’re heading home.”

At a few other moments the next two days, a horse would break for independence, but he never got far from Charlie’s eye and hands.

We would ride up the West Fork of the Ruby toward Hogback Mountain, a long handsome scarp which I’d climbed long ago from the west side, then pick up the Snowcrest Trail as it winds north and northeast. We would learn how little this old trail is used or maintained. And I earned some points as a pathfinder.

I rode atop Braveheart, one of Charlie’s bigger horses, and like to think I got the hang of it. When horses cross any creek, they stop...
and water, and, if the trail ascends a bit, they suddenly trot, and I learned to grab the saddle horn.

On that first sunny morning, we picked up the Snowcrest Trail about a mile east of Hogback, then lost it along a line of timber. When there's no clear trail through timber, with horses you stop. After snacking, Charlie and I set off on foot, and I eventually popped out amidst more high sagebrush meadows a quarter-mile above Ledford Pass, our goal. Eventually, I circled back to the other two, and we rode well east around timber, occasionally finding sections of old trail, to the open pass and descended to Devil's Hole, through which Ledford Creek runs. While en route we stopped to cut and saw obstructions and detour as necessary. Moving through woods with horses is a different proposition.

We made camp at a meadow with the last sure water and then the horseflies swarmed. When we'd swat a horse's hide, we'd usually kill more than one fly. Charlie and Callie valiantly sprayed, but we needed much more. I knew what “Devils” meant that late afternoon. Eventually, Charlie line tethered the horses, we drank a precious beer, he cooked marinated elk steaks, and I recognized key differences between backpacking and horse packing.

Our second day of riding would be much longer. We first flailed about above Devil’s Hole, trying to follow the trail – having missed the crucial unmarked junction, it turns out. I cross-countried up the ridge, found the trail, then descended back to the others. We rode up over the unnamed pass below Spur Mountain and the scenery opened and opened. My eyes kept swiveling between patches of white columbine and the Ruby and Blacktail valleys, nary a road in sight, let alone ranch outbuildings.

Occasionally we'd lose the faint or non-existent trail, then pick it up again a hundred meters or more ahead. Occasional cairns guided us up and down. An hour or more after our lunch stop, we topped out on the Snowcrest Trail (at or above 9,000’), where it runs North-South along the crest 2,000’ or more above the Upper Ruby Valley immediately east. Patches of dark nimbus clouds dramatized the landscape and shafts of virga arrowed down at different points of the compass.

Then the trail petered out again, and we rode below the top awhile, trying to re-locate it. When we were leading the horses back to the top and a trail post, Braveheart balked for one moment, and I suddenly roller-coasted down the low-angle talus, a bit bloodied and momentarily breathless. Callie and Charlie cleaned and bandaged me, and I might have earned a few more points.

Six feet up on a high-angle slope feels vulnerable, at least for this neophyte, compared to walking switchbacks.

When I slid off Braveheart to open that final fence just above the road, I felt my age and then some. Charlie noted I lacked any spring in my step by then.

It was 8:30 p.m. by the time I shuttled Charlie back to his truck and trailer. I certainly learned something about his expertise with horses and panniers and loads. He earned his cowboy hat and chaps long ago. Callie handles her old horse with great aplomb.

Maybe I’ve passed the tenderfoot rank by now. I treasure every hour of this trip and look forward to swinging my right leg up over Braveheart or another brave horse. And despite trail confusion, I love the Snowcrest Range all the more.
In May, five Wild Montana members and Southwestern Wildlands Chapter volunteers installed a new all-metal hitch rail at the Odell Creek Trailhead in the West Pioneer Mountains. The old U.S. Forest Service hitch rails had wooden legs that had rotted off making them unusable for tying up stock. The new rail was purchased with RAC (Resource Advisory Committee) money that was part of a trail grant obtained by Wild Montana last year.