A Word from the President

CHARLIE O’LEARY
Southwestern Wildlands Chapter president

When John Denver wrote the lyrics for “Annie's Song,” he referenced the feelings of fullness we experience when we spend a “night in a forest,” or on “mountains in springtime,” or on “a walk in the rain.” Denver no doubt drew much of his musical inspiration from the Rocky Mountains, perhaps best exemplified in his 1980 piece called “The Mountain Song,” in which he references everything from the mighty summits to the splendor of a field of columbines to the music of the night wind in the pines. He refers to the wild places as a lady with whom he has fallen in love, but he also draws attention to the forces out there which might exploit her, steal her beauty, betray her, take her riches, and be gone. We see more of that every year in the backcountry but let us not forsake our Southwestern Wildlands Lady. Read more inside about how you can help through our upcoming “Visit With Respect” project.

CHARLIE O’LEARY
Southwestern Wildlands Chapter president
Wild Montana members in the Southwestern Wildlands Chapter have organized area stewardship projects for many years. Our chapter has cleared trails, pushed back on weed infestations, repaired campgrounds and trailheads, and offered packing support for U.S. Forest Service and Wild Montana extended-stay backcountry work crews.

Last August, eight members and their 12 head of horses met with Wild Montana Stewardship Director Matt Bowser and his Volunteer Trail Crew at the Lost Meadow Trailhead south of Wise River. We loaded all the necessary tools and equipment, a camp kitchen, and food for seven days on the pack animals for the seven-mile journey. Once there, the crew did a fantastic job on some long-deferred trail maintenance in the Abundance and Crescent Lakes basin.

Our work will continue in the Canyon Creek area of the East Pioneers Recommended Wilderness this coming summer. If you are interested in joining Southwestern Wildlands Chapter’s stewardship crew or getting certified in chainsaw or crosscut saw use, call us at 406-491-1428.
Last fall, Southwestern Wildlands Chapter applied for and received a Resource Advisory Committee (RAC) grant for a project we call “Visit With Respect.” Many of us have noticed an increasing degree of man’s footprint around the backcountry lakes in our region. By footprint, we mean garbage – like plastic, aluminum, and glass containers melted in campfire ashes. We see way too many fire rings – some previously abandoned, some stacked high with scorched rocks and discarded cooking utensils. We also see an offensive array of camper-built “furniture” left behind, live trees chopped on, old tarps, buried garbage, un-spread horse manure, and more.

We are all familiar with the principles of “Leave No Trace,” “Light on the Land,” “Pack it in, pack it out,” and, most importantly, the basic tenet of the Wilderness Act: that the imprint of man’s work (and play) remains substantially unnoticeable.

Our chapter aims to restore the pristine nature of more than 50 mountain lakes within our Southwestern Wildlands Chapter area over the next two years. From the Anaconda-Pintler to the West Big Hole to the East and West Pioneers, we’ll train volunteers to clean up trash, naturalize abandoned fire pits, and document their work.

Our project has overwhelming support from the U.S. Forest Service, Big Hole Watershed Committee, and Back Country Horsemen of Montana. We’ll utilize the RAC grant to reimburse volunteers for travel expenses to and from project sites. If you’re interested in volunteering this summer, please contact us at 406-491-1428.
Land Use Decisions within Southwestern Wildlands

Thirteen years ago, the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest revised the forest plan to guide its management of our forest lands and resources. The plan identified three areas for recommended additions to our beloved Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness, which was congressionally designated in 1964 with the ratification of the Wilderness Act.

One of these recommended additions, north and west of the Big Hole River, is called “Hellroaring,” taking its name from a creek by the same name. Hellroaring Creek flows southeasterly about five miles from its Continental Divide origins down to the confluence with Mussigbrod Creek, which then continues another mile to Mussigbrod Lake situated just outside the addition boundary.

Numerous other creeks flow through the addition with names like Bender, Plimpton, Clam, Thompson, Howell, McCormick, and Roberts. One would have to guess that these creeks were named after pioneer settlers, explorers, miners, or ranchers. Clam Creek would be the exception. The creek flows through an 80-acre subalpine meadow known as Clam Valley. This environment is home to a rare species of freshwater clams, which are speculated to have survived there after some recent glacial retreat.

Six trails through the recommended addition allow access for foot and horse travel to the Bender and Mystic Lake cabins and a half dozen high mountain Wilderness lakes. Some trails may be difficult or unpassable by horse due to downfallen trees.

The area is known to provide excellent big game and fish habitat and adds to the unique beauty of the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness. Let’s make sure we support this 25-square mile addition when the opportunity arises.

Are you a Southwestern Wildlands Whiz?

1) The high mountains of southwest Montana feed fresh, clean water into numerous rivers. Which of these rivers is not one of them? Wise, Ruby, Bitterroot, Big Hole, Marias, Beaverhead, Clark Fork, or Red Rock?

2) Which southwest Montana mountain range has the highest summit? East Pioneers, Beaverheads, or Anaconda Pintlers?

3) Which of the following animals are found in our southwestern Wildlands? Whitetail deer, grizzly bear, badgers, caribou, wapiti, stone sheep, marmots, mule deer, Steller’s jay, Franklin’s ground squirrel?

4) What part of this sentence is not correct? “When snow melts at Tahepia Lake it flows down Jacobson Creek, Wise River, Big Hole River, Jefferson River, Yellowstone River, Missouri River, Mississippi River, and into the Gulf of Mexico.”

5) True or False: The Centennial Valley and the Red Rock Lakes are home to the largest waterfowl in North America: the Trumpeter Swan. They are year long residents and usually have a clutch size around five with maybe two successfully fledging.

Answers on back of newsletter
O. ALAN WELTZIEN
Southwestern Wildlands Chapter board member

The East Fork Blacktail Deer Creek Wilderness Study Area (EFBDC WSA)—swallow that one quickly three times—represents a small gem tucked on the west edge of southwest Montana’s Snowcrest Range: long a personal favorite and a range under study for decades as recommended Wilderness. The EFBDC, managed by the BLM, represents about 10 sections of land and is bordered on the north by the Blacktail State Wildlife Management Area and on the east and south by the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest.

A small campground exists at the end of the road, a long 38.5 or 44.8 miles (depending on which website you trust) from Dillon. You drive southeast out of town up the Blacktail and eventually, at a marked fork, you keep to the left. As the BLM website attests, the EFBDC WSA contains a diversity of habitats including “sagebrush foothills, grass parks, aspen and willow groves, alpine meadows, barren talus slopes, and Douglas fir and limber pine forests.”

It provides one of the best access points into the Snowcrest, as three trails splay south and east from the campground. The Crows Nest trail (#1807T) follows Crows Nest Creek northeast to the western slopes of Sunset Peak (10,581’), the highest mountain in the range. The Sawtooth Trail (#1802T) winds southwesterly up Indian Creek below this range’s Sawtooth Mountain and intersects the road to Antone Guard Station about a mile below its terminus.

The most popular trail (#1808 then #6069) follows the East Fork and curls east then northeast, below the east slopes of Sunset and Olson (10482’) Peaks, and after six-seven miles reaches Honeymoon Park, a broad saddle, both grassy and wooded. From here one can hike/backpack north along the Snowcrest Trail for many miles. From The Notch this trail winds along the east slopes of Hogback Mountain (10,572’), a long ridge, then crosses Ledford Pass, drops into Devils Hole, then rises and zigzags around Spur (10076’) and Sliderock (10439’)

Mountains for many miles northeast. Or one points the boots south along the high, open Snowcrest Trail, which passes just below Stonehouse Mountain (10075’). This trail stays high above timber as it winds along the crest, with excellent views west to the Blacktail range; east to the Gravelleys; and south to the Centennial valley and range.

I’ve day hiked, backpacked, trail run, and most recently ridden horseback in the Snowcrests, a range I’ve long loved. I’ve climbed its peaks. Over a quarter of a century ago, I hiked up Antone Peak (10247’), a fairly quick scramble above Antone Pass (just a mile and a half beyond the road end at Antone Guard Station). A few summers ago, I led a Wilderness Walk to Antone.

Outside general rifle season, the Snowcrests are not exactly crowded. And you have high chances of spotting whitetail or muleys, elk herds, and even moose or bear.

The Snowcrests form a classic southwestern Montana range, characterized by high meadows and big views. Come to the EFBDC Wilderness Study Area to launch into this wonderful range—which reminds us anew of why we live in Big Sky Country. But only tell a couple of your friends about it.
Sherry Vogel
Southwestern Wildlands Chapter secretary

Yellowstone is always a big draw, whether it’s the wildlife or thermal features. But I think we have all noticed it’s very popular. To avoid some of the crowd, consider a winter trip. The accessibility is limited, the wildlife is thankful for that I’m sure, but a cross-country ski into the Park is worth the effort.

There are a variety of groomed and ungroomed ski trails starting near Mammoth. One of our favorite trips starts right at the upper terrace. A steep climb up an ungroomed trail leads to Snow Pass which provides a sweeping view of Swan Lake Flats. The first time we made this trip, we didn’t know exactly where we were going, until we noticed very discretely placed orange flags mounted on posts. We were thankful for them this year as we squinted through graupel and a fierce wind. Heads down, we didn’t stop for much.

Upon reaching the road, we crossed onto groomed trail and soon welcomed the shelter of trees. This part of the trip circumnavigates Bunsen Peak. Bison are usually spotted along this trail, and we weren’t disappointed this year. A couple of bulls turned their backs and lifted a tail to us as we passed at a safe distance. A final fast descent curves around the last part of the mountain and down to our waiting car that we had shuttled earlier.

Another scenic ski follows a gentle trail from Tower Junction to Tower Falls. A long cliff of columnar basalt snakes along the Yellowstone River Canyon. A weeping wall of basalt hangs over the ski trail just before reaching the Falls. Not long enough? Add on the Chittenden Loop for an extra five miles and views of Mount Washburn.

For something closer to Mammoth, a groomed trail on Blacktail Plateau is an option. This 8-mile point-to-point trail gradually climbs through open meadows then descends through a spruce-fir forest. There are plenty of opportunities to view wildlife along this trail.

Embrace winter, go cross country skiing. Have fun and preserve the landscapes. Teach your children to love and defend public lands like they own them.
Southwest Montana boasts millions of acres of public land. The Bureau of Land Management’s Dillon Field Office manages over 900,000 of these acres in Beaverhead and Madison County. The current resource management plan for the region, now 16 years old, is undergoing evaluation by the agency to determine whether it needs to be revised. Wild Montana is engaging closely with this process to ensure the BLM considers how changes in wildlife habitat, fisheries and water resources, outdoor recreation, and climate change have evolved over the better part of two decades and how the plan should be updated to address those changes. If the BLM does decide an update is needed, there will be opportunities for the public to weigh in to ensure the best conservation outcomes. Wild Montana will be guiding our members and supporters through the process to help make your voices heard.

In other news, the Beaverhead Deerlodge National Forest recently gained a new forest supervisor, Lisa Timchak. She comes to Montana from Cody, Wyoming where she supervised the Shoshone National Forest. In conversations with Lisa, she has pledged to make travel planning one of her top priorities. We look forward to working with her to address the recreation management challenges facing the Forest and cultivating a good partnership with the agency.
Calendar of Events

For more information on any of the events listed below, please email southwestern.wildlands@wildmontana.org or visit wildmontana.org/swc.

March 12: Tabling at Back Country Horsemen of Montana Annual Convention in Dillon
March 23: Chapter Board Meeting at 5:30 p.m. Location TBD.
April 21: Chapter Board Meeting at 5:30 p.m. Location TBD.
April 23: Earth Day Event cleaning up Fishing Access Sites in the Big Hole.
May 18: Chapter Board Meeting at 5:30 p.m. Location TBD.
May 4-6: Wilderness Walks sign-ups begin. Register at wildmontana.org/walks.
June 4: National Trails Day stewardship project. Details TBD.
Jan. 1 – June 30: Chapter Membership Drive. Invite your friends and family to join Wild Montana! New members in our chapter area who join between now and June 30 will be entered into a drawing for an Oboz gift certificate. Join us at wildmontana.org/join.