Why Stewardship?

CHARLIE O'LEARY
Southwestern Wildlands Chapter past-president

The waiting time for a viable wilderness campaign, success in the halls of Washington D.C., a decision to be made on a wilderness study area, or for a travel management plan to be constructed and approved can be a test of our ability to be patient and persevere. Years, decades, maybe even lifetimes.

But waiting does not mean sitting still. We must be vigilant and continue our role as caretakers of the land we value so much. We caretake by standing up for access and ownership of public lands, working to preserve wilderness qualities in those areas like recommended wilderness and wilderness study areas. We caretake by alerting the agencies of vehicular transgressions or other threats to pristine or roadless lands. We caretake by assisting the agencies with trail maintenance, campground and fishing access cleanup along the Big Hole River, and with our recent effort called Visit with Respect, where we are rewilding as many as 52 high mountain lakes in our area by un-trashing the camping and fishing shorelines. Last summer, we completed this work on 16 lakes; 2023 will be a busy summer. We also caretake by supporting important new land acquisitions, such as forest inholdings and special pieces adjacent to existing public lands near recommended wilderness or wildlife management areas.

Other conservation groups like the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation are to be commended for digging deep for new public land purchases for wildlife and human benefit. The Big Hole Watershed Committee is working endlessly to solve the historical mine waste problems at Coolidge and around French Creek. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, through the dedication of fishery biologist Jim Olsen, is also persevering in their efforts to restore westslope cutthroat and Arctic grayling to our area streams.

We are all in this together: conservation, rewilding, and protecting. We shall not become discouraged or complacent, and we must continue to pass on the torch to the generations that follow.

This is my last month as your president. I have thoroughly enjoyed guiding the efforts of the Southwestern Wildlands Chapter in our mission of conservation and stewardship. We have some talented and dedicated new officers taking over, who will continue our busy stewardship schedule and all the other fun things planned for 2023. As always, thanks for your continued support, and I’ll see you on the trail.
Montana’s Southernmost Landscape
Volunteers clear trash from campgrounds and fishing access sites along the Big Hole River

O. ALAN WELTZIEN
Southwestern Wildlands Chapter board member

I’ve always wanted to stand atop the southernmost point in Montana, but despite several attempts, still have yet to reach this remote point situated a half mile southeast of Italian Peak. Generous swaths of the Deadman and Nicholia Creek country form the Italian Peaks Recommend Wilderness area (25,300 acres).

Twenty or more summers ago, one friend and I backpacked to Deadman Lake and up the drainage to the high pass between Deadman and Nicholia Creeks. Subsequently, I’ve day hiked up the Nicholia drainage several times and climbed Italian Peak (10,998’) twice. It and the surrounding peaks form the southern end of Montana’s (and Idaho’s) Beaverhead Range: high remote peaks.

The modern Continental Divide Trail (CDT) shortcuts across the drainages, so thru-hikers miss the rugged meadows and rockslides and steep spur ridges and gullies characterizing this grand corner. Grass and water allow many possible campsites in the meadows where the two drainages begin, in the shadow of Italian Peak and that southernmost point. This country merits a day or two of exploring.

Excepting CDT thru-hikers in the summer and autumn hunters, this portion of the USFS’s Lima Peaks Management Area stays uncrowded. We like it that way, so when you hike in, don’t tell too many friends about it.

Because I’m a mountains fanatic though a lousy technical climber, I’d long wanted to reach Scott Peak (11,378’) about a mile over the border into Idaho and highest of all the Beaverhead Mountains. A friend and I camped at the road’s end in Scott Canyon (7500’) (Idaho) next to an aspen grove. Following another friend’s advice, we first climbed Webber Peak (11,284’) just south, then strolled north to Scott Peak.

From here, it’s a rough scramble beyond Scott Peak back into Montana. Cedron Jones’s “Peakbagging Montana” claims you can scramble to the southernmost point from the Deadman-Nicholia pass and then reach it and Scott Peak. Guess I’ve picked the wrong couloirs before. I can’t recommend Italian Peaks area enough: a perfect example of giant Beaverhead County’s remote basin-and-range terrain. It’s a good place to get high.

Looking westerly from Scott Peak, toward the southernmost point of Montana, Italian Peak, and the Lemhi Valley (photo by O. Alan Welzein)
RNA’s: What they are and where to find them in southwest Montana

CHARLIE O’LEARY
Southwestern Wildlands Chapter past-president

There are 15 such areas in our part of southwest Montana, with research interests varying from bog meadows to the mighty whitebark pines and rare plants to unique geography.

Here’s a short review of four in case you want to visit and do your own research.

• **Goat Flats**, 1287 acres, located within the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness, about a mile above Seymour lake, is home to rare plants and notable trees. The last time I was there, a strong wind blew my friend’s cowboy hat over the edge and a half mile down the scree. He figured it was easier to buy a new hat, so it’s still there.

• **Dexter Basin**, 1109 acres, located 7 miles west of Storm Lake Pass in a recommended addition to the Anaconda Pintler Wilderness, is home to several tree species. I’ve never been to this one.

• **Elkhorn Lake**, 1765 acres, is located a couple of miles above the Coolidge ghost town and is also in a Forest Service recommended wilderness. This is a beautiful place, and Southwest Wildlands Chapter members have led some Wilderness Walks here in previous years. Whitebark pine, whortleberries, and the subalpine lake (Elkhorn) are the main features of this RNA. The last quarter mile of the trail is steep and hard to follow, but the lake and its surrounding cirque are a treat to see.

• **Skull-Odell RNA** is the second largest RNA in the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest at 2543 acres. A special place within the West Pioneers Wilderness Study Area, this one includes Odell Lake on its western end, then stretches northerly and easterly for several miles. This is wet, bog-hole country, and this unique saturated environment makes it of special interest. If you have an older map, you will see trail #2141, which allegedly takes you from Odell Creek to Lacy Creek. Trust me, it is no longer there, and this is definitely not horse country. When I tried 20 years ago, the beautiful grass of Skull Creek Meadows tricked me into a bog, and my horse Sonny almost didn’t make it out. An hour later, we sunk a pack animal to his belly at a quicksand-like creek crossing. Aside from that, this is a quiet, species-rich place to get lost in for a day. And afterward, you can relax at your Odell Lake campfire and plan your next Research Natural Area adventure. (For more information, consult the current BH-DL forest plan.)

What’s a Research Natural Area?
From S. Chadde, S. Kimball, and A. Evenden 1996

A major objective of the Forest Service Research Natural Area (RNA) program is to maintain a representative array of all significant natural ecosystems as baseline areas for research and monitoring (Forest Service Manual 4063, USDA Forest Service 1991). The National Forest Management Act of 1976 directs the agency to establish research natural areas typifying important forest, shrubland, grassland, alpine, and aquatic ecosystems. In addition to their value as reference areas for research and monitoring, RNAs help maintain biological diversity and healthy ecosystems on national forests by conserving assemblages of common and rare species, undisturbed plant communities, aquatic systems, and unique landscape features such as wetlands and ancient cedar groves.
Critters of Southwest Montana: The Northern Goshawk

JACK KIRKLEY, PH.D
Emeritus professor of biology at University of Montana Western

The Northern Goshawk (Accipiter gentilis) is a large-sized hawk with a vast geographic range spanning not only the forests of North America, but also the forests of Europe and Asia. However, because of its reclusive behavior, goshawks are seen much less often than other large birds of prey. I’ve studied goshawks in southwestern Montana for nearly 3 decades, since 1993.

In summertime, goshawks breed in high mountain forests, nesting in older-aged stands with large, mature trees that form closed canopies. Hence, some researchers have argued that goshawks should be regarded as “old growth forest specialists.” The difficult task of finding goshawk nests in the vast mountain forests is like the proverbial “needle in a haystack.” This is the main reason why goshawks are so seldom seen, and why they are so difficult to census and to study in detail.

Over time, goshawks tend to build several large stick nests, called “alternate nests,” within their breeding territory. Some of those alternate nests may be built in close proximity to one another, whereas other nests may be a mile or more from the core group. Hence, even in those cases where I find only empty nests, there is always the possibility that an active nest does exist elsewhere in that territory.

When approaching an active goshawk nest, one is usually accosted by the loud, threatening alarm call of the female ... “KACK-KACK-KACK” ... meaning “BACK OFF ... OR GET READY TO DUCK!” Although goshawks do have a well-earned reputation for being highly aggressive, sometimes even striking an intruder, I’ve found their behaviors to be individually quite variable. Amazingly, some goshawks

A female goshawk feeding her young.
have been entirely tolerant, unruffled by my presence. Goshawks typically don’t nest in sparsely timbered landscapes, but they will frequently hunt along the edges of park-like forest openings. Goshawks prey upon small mammals such as chipmunks, squirrels and rabbits, while also capturing a wide variety of birds, from robin-sized birds such as thrushes and jays, to chicken-sized birds such as upland grouse.

Using radio telemetry (I radio-tagged over 60 adult goshawks), I monitored the movements of many individuals, some for periods of up to 2 or 3 years. One objective was to determine their nonbreeding season movements, which has largely been a mystery. About half of my radioed adults stayed within the study area all year, whereas the other half “disappeared” during the winter months, but then most of them returned again the next spring. Nearly all of the winter movements of the year-around resident goshawks took place in the river valleys and low elevation foothills. Hence, these summertime “old growth forest” goshawks all transitioned into “open country” hawks during the rest of the year, a shift that likely makes them much more vulnerable to eagle predation.

Multiple petitions to list the Northern Goshawk as a threatened or endangered species have been denied by the USFWS, due to a lack of evidence of serious population declines. During the past decade, I’ve been seeing far fewer active goshawk nests during my annual summer surveys of their historical nesting territories. But, I have no explanation for this apparent decline in the number of nesting goshawks, since most of their forest habitats still appear to be in suitable condition. So, I must admit that I have more questions than answers about the goshawk’s current population status and its long-term future in the face of climate change. Time will tell.
Other News from Southwestern Wildlands Chapter:

At the annual Wild Montana volunteer appreciation dinner in Helena last month two of our own were recognized.

Mike Sullivan, our preeminent trail clearing guy, received the Volunteer of the Year award for his sustained and tireless effort at moving downfall off the trails of southwest Montana. While Mike is a retired professional logger, he just isn’t comfortable if he doesn’t have a chainsaw in his hand!

Also recognized with a Brass Lantern Award was another board member, Rick Douglass, who is ever present at meetings, trail and weed control projects, river cleanup, and wherever a seasoned camp cook is needed to feed the crew. Thanks and congratulations to both Rick and Mike.

Right: Mike Sullivan poses with his crosscut saw (photo by Keely Kiewiet)  
Below: Rick Douglass receives the Brass Lantern Award for his contributions to Wild Montana (photo by Christian Sawicki)
Join us for a Winter Adventure in southwest Montana

January through March, our chapter will offer Winter Adventures in southwest Montana. These free outings and educational experiences are led by volunteers who are passionate about Montana’s wild public lands. Registration opens for each outing one month before the event date. All Winter Adventures are free and open to the public, but some adventures require you to provide your own equipment (such as cross-country skis and snowshoes).

**Mount Haggin Snowshoe**  
Sunday, March 12  
Nearest town: Anaconda | Difficulty: Easy

Join Montana Wildlife Federation and Wild Montana for a snowshoe adventure in Mount Haggin. Mount Haggin is Montana’s largest wildlife management area, and it provides year-round habitat to elk, moose, and mule deer. We’ll meet near Sugarloaf Lodge and hike through aspen groves and pine forests in the Pintler Mountains with views of the Big Hole Valley. There is a network of groomed cross country ski trails and a warming hut nearby as well.

**Storm Lake Cross-Country Ski**  
Thursday, March 23  
Nearest town: Anaconda | Difficulty: Extremely Strenuous

Enjoy a cross-country ski along Storm Lake Creek Road to Storm Lake, one of the most beautiful lakes in the Anaconda Pintler Wilderness. The route is 13 miles roundtrip. On the way to the lake, it’s a gently climb until the last mile when it gets a bit more challenging. The lake is surrounded by designated and recommended wilderness. Learn more about the difference and the efforts of Wild Montana’s Southwestern Wildlands Chapter to protect our public lands and waters.

Register for these adventures and more at wildmontana.org/adventures
Meet Hannah Breslin, Our New Field Organizer

Hello, Southwestern Wildlands Chapter! I just wanted to take a moment to introduce myself as the new Wild Montana field organizer working with the Southwestern Wildlands Chapter, as well as the Madison-Gallatin Chapter. I am originally from urban Oakland, California. As a dirt-loving kid, I was lucky enough to spend my weekends in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, collecting grasshoppers and blackberries in the summer and learning to ski at a tiny little resort in the winter.

In college at UC Santa Barbara, I began to explore the natural world in earnest both academically and recreationally. I earned my bachelor’s in ecology and evolutionary biology with a minor in earth science – a ploy to get me outside under the guise of academics. Outside of the classroom, I was the president of the outdoors club on campus and spent far too many hours driving to the Sierra on weekends.

To shorten my commute to the mountains, I googled “best snow in America” and moved to Jackson, Wyoming, site unseen, via my bicycle when I graduated college.

In Jackson, I worked for a joint powers board, encouraging the growth of locally grid-tied renewable sources and finding funding for energy efficiency projects. After two years in Jackson, I got the itch to explore more and moved north to Montana. I began working on a farm in Bozeman, as well as assistant teaching for field biology courses in Alaska, Hawaii, and Iceland a few times per year. During these courses, I began learning different land management practices and the cascading effects that they have both on the landscape and the surrounding communities. At the intersection of community, the environment, and recreation, I decided that this field married all of my interests.

Hannah Breslin talking to a college student about voting for public lands. (photo by Christian Sawicki)