

Morrell Creek Outdoor Classroom Going Strong

By Bruce Rieman, Patti Bartlett, Ryen Aashiem

A cold and rainy May and early June didn't slow down progress on the Morrell Creek Riparian Classroom project, the brainchild of Seeley Lake Junior High School teacher Patti Bartlett. Work on the project began in April (see Pathfinder April 29, 2010) and forged ahead in May and June, supported by some sweat equity from elementary and junior high students as well as funding, materials, and time donated from local citizens, agencies, and organizations.

If you've driven by the Seeley-Swan High School recently, you've probably noticed some changes. A giant mound of wood chips that blanketed roughly two acres west of the parking lot and an area adjacent to the creek are gone, and the original surface elevations have been restored. More than 25 rooted willows have been planted, both areas have been seeded with native grasses, a first round of weed control via a lot of muddy hands and knees has happened, and a gravel pad for an eventual teaching site is in place.

The project's goal is to extend the natural science experience of local students and interested citizens through direct involvement in restoration and management of an important natural area in the Clearwater Valley. The condition of riparian (or streamside) areas is key to water quality, cool water temperatures, and good habitat for fish like bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout as well as many birds. They provide secure movement corridors for other wildlife. Healthy riparian areas can also go a long way to protecting water quality in the lakes because they filter runoff that may carry excess nutrients or other pollutants from the surrounding lands. Most students are exposed to these ideas in classroom lectures via books and videos, but many may never really spend time exploring them in the real world. Patti's students get special treatment and are often outside, in the creek, and exposed to the natural world in ways that have become uncommon in public education. Each year, her students have sampled and explored Morrell Creek from the side of the road without the benefit of any facilities or interpretive information. The Morrell Creek Riparian Classroom project will provide those facilities. It will also engage students in hands-on restoration and maintenance, hopefully creating ownership and a better understanding of how these places work.

Although heavy equipment has been used to remove the wood chips and restore the contours of the land, the students are doing most of the hand labor. They started with an initial clean up of trash and junk dumped in the area (see Pathfinder Article April 29). That was followed by planting willows and seeding with native grasses. Next was a classroom and on-the-ground (literally on their hands and knees) session on weed identification and control that culminated in three hours of weed pulling in late May. Students are assembling, installing, and maintaining browse protection and mulch to maintain new plantings using purchased materials.

Next fall, students will be involved with continued re-vegetation using native plants, weed control, and maintenance and browse protection for new plantings. They will research and design three interpretative signs on the influence of riparian areas on stream ecology, habitat for native fish (with bull trout and other native fish habitat information), and birds and mammals. Students will also identify tree and shrub species and will place identification signs on or near key species. The interpretive signs will be installed next fall or the following spring. A group of permanent tables and benches will also be constructed by students at the high school and installed on the teaching site.

The project grew out of discussions with Patti, the Clearwater Resource Council, the Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, and the Missoula Conservation District. An initial design and funding were provided by the Missoula Conservation District under their Outdoor Classroom Program. Since then, interest and support has continued to expand, with funding, materials, labor, and consultation donated by the Lolo National Forest, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Missoula County Weed District, Seeley Lake Trucking, and Greenwing Restoration.

The project continues to grow, and volunteers will be needed to help move things along with occasional work parties in the future. If you'd like to get involved, please call Patti at 210-3038 or Megan Birzell at 677-0069.



Caption: Students pulled weeds in the project area in advance of replanting it with native species.

*The above article was published in the June 24, 2010 issue of the Seeley-Swan Pathfinder.