

Volunteers Restore, Reclaim, and Revegetate

By Lee Boman

Starting high in the Swan Range Trail Creek brings more than just pleasant sounds, peace, and beauty as it travels through our community to eventually join Morrell Creek. Trail Creek also brings life supporting water and food for insects, fish, birds, deer, and other wildlife. Trail Creek flowing through neighborhoods enhances property value. Trail Creek even helps us have a beautiful golf course enjoyed by residents and guests. It's easy to take the blessings we enjoy thanks to Trail Creek for granted, but after a thoughtful pause it becomes clear all streams including Trail Creek, Morrell Creek, Clearwater River, Blackfoot River, and the Swan River nourish us spiritually, economically, and ecologically.

Sometimes our desire to live and play close to streams hurts the very streams we want to enjoy. Trail Creek needed some attention due to a few well intentioned behaviors that turned out to be harmful. Those actions included mowing to stream edge, motorized activity along stream, and heavy foot traffic at stream edge. Many streams naturally move their channels, but sometimes that can conflict directly with our use of adjacent lands. Actions that removed protective streamside vegetation resulted in Trail Creek becoming even more active, eroding its banks and threatening the Double Arrow Home Owners pavilion and Homestead Cabin.

The actions that hurt streamside vegetation also diminished habitat for the bull trout, westslope cutthroat trout, and other fish in Trail Creek. Bull trout are a threatened species, in part because of habitat loss and because they need colder water than other fish. A reduction in streamside vegetation reduces the shade over the stream, which results in warmer water. Historically it is believed Trail Creek was a favorite spot for bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout to spawn. Currently there are only remnant populations of these species in Trail Creek. The opportunity to restore the habitat supporting these populations is another compelling reason local volunteers became involved in the Trail Creek project.

With encouragement from Patti Bartlett and her students at Seeley Lake Junior High about a dozen volunteers representing a half dozen organizations realized the importance of Morrell Creek and Trail Creek to our community and decided to react. Experts with natural resource

organizations and Missoula Conservation District were consulted. A plan for a \$4,800 project was developed that would help restore the streamside, protect the pavilion, enhance habitat for insects, fish, birds and other animals and help ensure Trail Creek continues to enhance property values and quality of life in Seeley Lake. \$3,600 would come from Missoula Conservation District. The balance could be paid through volunteer labor.

One of the first major action steps in the Trail Creek plan was to plant about 120 willow cuttings in the streamside. Planting the cuttings was more like driving stakes in the ground. Stakes that required watering by volunteers throughout the hot months hoping the stakes would turn into willows.

Another major action step was to build an attractive fence that would be pleasing to landowners but stifle streamside motorized activity. A jack leg fence was agreed upon and constructed by volunteers.

The next major step was to plant a variety of trees and shrubs and install browse protection for the new plantings. Chokecherries, Thinleaf alder, Saskatoon serviceberry, Engelmann spruce, and Rocky Mountain juniper were selected to complement existing vegetation. Sixty-seven trees and shrubs were planted with browse protection by volunteers.

Finally, the Trail Creek project called for an interpretative sign that would inform and educate. Trail Creek volunteers pondered who should compose the message to go on the sign. When someone suggested Ms Bartlett's Jr. High School students, the decision was made. Ms Bartlett is a driving force behind our outdoor classroom on Morrell Creek where her students have learned about interdependency in the natural world. The sign won't be installed until spring, but highlights of the message from the students include:

Please help protect our streams because healthy riparian areas filter out potential pollutants . . . natural vegetation along streams creates habitats for birds and keeps water cool in summer . . . Bull Trout need lots of clear, cold water . . .

You can help by not building or logging close to streams . . .leaving streamside vegetation to develop naturally . . .only visit these areas on foot . . .volunteering to help . . .

Close to the restoration work on Trail Creek another natural feature came to the attention of volunteers. It turns out we have some rare native prairie in the same area. Grasses in native prairie grows in clumps spaced apart, a growing pattern that slows fire. During this project we learned from Green Wing Restoration that mowing native grasses gives an advantage to non-native grasses. Non-native grasses burn readily, increasing fire danger. Therefore we can reduce fire risk by not mowing the native grasses we are fortunate to have in the Homestead Cabin area.

The Trail Creek project is a great example of neighbors working together with some direction from knowledgeable sources to make social and economic enhancements to our community. It would not have happened without volunteers willing to design, water, mulch, drill, dig, haul, provide tools, cut poles, and install browse protection. Don't be surprised when you ask the folks listed below about the project to see a smile spread across their face.

The organizations listed below provided knowledge, funds, and materials. Each is an effective organization eager to help our community. Contact them to learn of volunteer projects so you too can enjoy a little digging, cutting, planting, and of course, a laugh or two.

The following organizations made this project possible:

- Clearwater Resource Council
- Missoula Conservation District
- Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited
- Seeley Lake Jr. High School students
- Montana Department of Fish Wildlife and Parks
- Green Wing Restoration
- Double Arrow Ranch Landowners Association

The following volunteers worked over 300 hours on this project:

- Ken Barber
- Bruce Rieman
- Karen Pratt
- Jim Haueter
- Judy Boman
- Guido Niederoest
- George Frasca

---Joann Wallenburn
---Heinz Eisinger
---Pat Mahoney
---David Wallenburn
---Lee Boman