

## **Morrell Creek – An important place with links to the past and future.**

**By Ken Barber and Bruce Rieman**

The Morrell Creek watershed which includes a major tributary, Trail Creek, has been a pretty important spot in the Clearwater Basin, and seems likely to remain that way. The watershed supports one of the largest tributaries of the Clearwater River, a major source of cold, high quality water, and one of a handful of “core” habitat areas for bull trout (a threatened species under the Endangered species act), and westslope cutthroat trout in the Clearwater and larger Blackfoot basins. It also encompasses a mix of forest habitats and provides an important migratory corridor for species like elk and grizzly bears.

The watershed encompasses two counties and a mix of public and private lands. Most of the upper watershed was consolidated in Forest Service ownership from a patchwork of Plum Creek and Forest Service in the last few years. The lower watershed encompasses county, state, and private lands including the Seeley Swan High School, the Double Arrow subdivision and the Double Arrow Lodge resort and golf course. The watershed and associated streams serve as a source of water for homes and pastures, a scenic backdrop for homes and vacation spots, and pretty nice place to wander about in summer and winter. Given that, a whole lot of creatures, human and non-human alike, get a whole lot of benefits out of the Morrell Creek watershed.

The current character of Morrell Creek was strongly shaped by a dramatic history of geology and climate. Roughly 12 to 20,000 years ago.... give or take a few thousand years.... the valley was buried in glaciers that scoured the valley walls and floor and left behind a deep “till” of gravels. Since then, the Morrell and Trail creek have slowly “incised” their way up through that valley fill. Many recognize the clear terraces or benches along the creeks that mark the edges of all that work by spring floods, and now make good pastures and nice places to build houses. The streams are still working, tons of gravel still move out in the spring, but there’s still a lot left. One result is that a lot of the water moves subsurface through that fill and not all on the surface in the stream (ever notice how Morrell Creek goes dry in some of the middle-upper reaches?). That process means the water that is in the stream is particularly cold in summer making it perfect habitat for bull trout. It’s also the source of the seeps and springs, many have noticed that support small wetlands, ponds, and marshy areas that make great habitat for lots of creatures.

In more recent times, the meadows and high quality water probably attracted the earliest human inhabitants . Native Americans probably used the area for both fishing and summering areas. White settlers certainly used it as well. The name “Morrell” has been tied to the peak, falls and stream, and a prairie in the Seeley Lake area. We’ve found relatively little information about the namesake, Charles Thomas Morrell - one of the area’s early homesteaders. We do know C. T. Morrell was part of a large family and that is father, Richard, was killed in the battle of Antietam in the Civil War. Charles was one of the youngest of 5 children, grew up in the state of New York, and then traveled to Montana, before it became a state in 1889. His sister Nan (Ketchum), moved from New

York to Helena first. She apparently wrote to her brother telling him it would be a fine place for him to start a business. He moved to Seeley Lake where he bought property south of town near the mouth of the creek that bears his name in 1894. Charles homesteaded the area until 1910 when his wife (Laura) died and he decided to return to Helena. Morrell sold his land holdings to the Corlett family and this property eventually became part of the Double Arrow Ranch. It is likely his homestead at the mouth of Morrell creek was responsible for the Creek (and surrounding landmarks) eventually bearing his name.

The history of the Morrell Creek watershed since early settlement, can be readily observed today. Logging in part of the upper watershed, ranching, housing and resort development are all testimony to the natural resource and aesthetic values it supports. Construction of screened irrigation diversions to protect migrating bull trout and watershed restoration supported by the MT Fish Wildlife and Parks, Trout Unlimited and the Forest Service are evidence of continuing investments to protect the unique history and conditions for native fishes.

The future of the Morrell Creek watershed is uncertain, for sure, but our guess is that it will continue to be a valuable human and natural resource for many years to come. The significance of Morrell creek has not been lost on a group of teachers, agency specialists, and citizens of the Clearwater Valley. Patti Barlett of the Seeley Lake Junior High, and Tonya Smith, and Mary Stone of the Seeley Swan High School have adopted Morrell Creek as a natural laboratory and classroom. They have initiated restoration and monitoring work that has already paid off with new information and interest in students and the community. The “Morrell Creek Riparian Classroom”, “Students In Action” monitoring project” and the “Trail Creek Restoration” project on the Double Arrow commons are all products of this growing interest and leadership in the schools. This work has attracted support and additional effort from local collaborative organizations like CRC and Trout Unlimited, and from the Forest Service, Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Missoula Conservation District, some regional and local foundations, and others. The fact that Morrell Creek is close to both the Seeley Swan High School and Seeley Lake Elementary and Junior High make it an excellent site for study by students and an excellent educational site for the rest of us as well.

The visibility, natural value and interesting history of the system seem likely to bode well for this system in the future. If you're interested in helping out with work on Morrell Creek or other natural resources in the Valley contact Ken Barber at 677-0069.