



LakeFront

Quarterly newsletter to Whitefish Lake Institute members

Fall 2006

Special Wetlands Issue

Montana's Wetlands

-Lynda Saul, Montana Wetlands Coordinator

The wetland resources of Montana have been impacted incrementally over decades affecting people, wildlife and water resources. The State has lost more than a quarter of its pre-settlement wetlands to development and agriculture (over 310,000 acres) and many other wetlands are degraded in quality. These new stressors to Montana's wetlands include pollutant loading, hydrologic modification, invasive species and habitat fragmentation.

Wetlands provide a number of environmentally and economically important functions in watersheds such as flood control, groundwater recharge and water quality protection by trapping and reducing the transport of excess nutrients, contaminants, sediments, fertilizers and pesticides downstream. Wetlands also provide wildlife habitat, biodiversity, recreation, hunting and fishing and economic value. While wetland and riparian areas occupy less than 5% of Montana's land surface, they provide essential habitat for 60% of species identified as having greatest conservation need (DFWP 2005).

The Federal Government recognizes the importance of wetlands, many of which fall under the Clean Water Act (CWA). Section 404 of the Clean Water Act requires approval from the Corps of Engineers before placing dredged or fill material into waters of the United States, including wetlands. However, recent Supreme Court decisions have limited the scope and thrown into question

CWA jurisdiction for some types of wetlands. These recent turns are troubling and incongruous to federal policy. A decade ago, after becoming aware of the impacts to water quality and wildlife caused by the destruction of more than 50 percent of the national natural wetlands, the Federal Government established a national no net loss policy. This policy was elevated to a national net gain goal of 3 million acres by 2009 by President George Bush in 2004.

Montanan's understand the *(continued on page 2)*

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Whitefish Lake
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*Protecting and improving the
Whitefish, Montana area
lake resources*

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Founded in 2005, the Whitefish Lake Institute is committed to acquiring scientific research and engaging the local citizenry to protect and improve the Whitefish area lake resources of today, while providing a collective vision for tomorrow.

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Mike Koopal, Editor

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 Wetland along Voerman Road

(*MT Wetlands, continued from page 1*) functions and benefits wetlands provide. Eighty-three percent surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that “It’s important to me that wetland and riparian areas in Montana are conserved and protected” (DFWP 2003). Despite this, there is no state-specific legislation protecting Montana’s wetlands and wetlands continue to be individually and cumulatively impacted. They are treated as waters of the state when water is present and fall under the Montana Water Quality Act.

Over the past decade, the State has been implementing a Wetland Conservation Strategy involving voluntary incentive-based restoration and protection <http://www.wetlandslegacy.org>, targeted education and outreach, wetland mapping and monitoring, assisting local governments, and promoting regulatory protection. The state-wide Montana Wetland Council helps to facilitate management and protection of wetlands and DEQ also administer an EPA funded competitive grant program for wetland protection capacity building at the state and local level. Please contact Lynda Saul at lsaul@mt.gov, (406) 444-6652 for more information about these programs or to get on the Wetland Council list-serve.

Mother/Daughter Duo Help Wetlands

On a rainy afternoon in November, I sat down for tea and cookies with Margaret Murdock and her daughter Sharlot Battin. I wanted to find out what inspired them to place just under 200 acres of their land, roughly situated between Wisconsin and Texas Avenues, into a conservation easement.

Conservation easements are restrictions landowners voluntarily place on their property that legally bind the actions of present and future owners. In other words, the easement reflects the value of the development rights the landowner is giving up, for which they receive tax incentives. But that wasn’t the driving force behind Margaret and Sharlot’s decision.

As Margaret put it, “We don’t see this land as a commodity. We see it as something to be respected.”

As I found out, the two women have come from a matriarchal lineage of hard working, visionary women. Margaret’s mother, Bertha Reich, homesteaded in what amounted to nothing more than a tent that shielded her and her brother from the cold, windy eastern Montana winters near Winifred. (Margaret and Sharlot also placed that 200 acre property into an easement).

After marrying, Bertha and her husband, Hugo, bought the Whitefish property from George and Minnie Baker in 1930. Margaret likes the idea that, “Starting with Minnie, a man has never held the deed to this property.” The men did, however, work the land. Hugo raised oats, timothy and clover for livestock (something the Baker brothers had started in order to feed the horses for their logging operations).

Margaret and Sharlot’s conservation easement still allows agricultural and logging activities on the land provided it fits into the conditions set forth in the agreement with The Nature Conservancy, the easement holder.

Margaret retired in 1985 after 36 years of teaching in Columbia Falls, and Sharlot makes shoes for Broadway productions while splitting her time between her Whitefish shop and the Big Apple.

During hikes in the easement throughout the years, they have seen mountain lions, grizzlies, black bears, moose, deer, turkeys, owls, eagles, hawks, not to mention sensitive species like the LeConte’s Sparrow and Small Yellow Ladies Slipper. Would they place the property into a conservation easement if they had to do it all over again? “Oh yeah.” -MK

Executive Director's Essay

Looking at the Value of the Wisconsin Avenue Wetlands

If you were to ask advertising executives what natural feature they would choose to promote Montana, I'm sure their minds would churn with opportunities to over-apply lipstick to any number of our beautiful natural resources.

How about the peaks of Glacier National Park mirrored in Lake McDonald on a calm morning? What about the Madison River at sunset during a caddis fly hatch with a fine mist rising from the casting loops of an angler's fly-line?

One thing's for certain, a scene from a wetland is probably towards the bottom of the ad executives list. In fact, a wetland scene would probably only be afforded a fine coating of chapstick.

Wetlands don't seem to possess the romantic, adventuresome appeal to most. Perhaps it's because they can be smelly and hard to walk around in. So what good are they?

In my opinion, not another ecosystem found on this planet is more misunderstood and undervalued than are wetlands. We, as Americans, have a long history of viewing wetlands as wastelands that should be drained and converted for more "beneficial uses" like crop acreage, development, or whatever suits our needs.

In a March 2006 letter to the directors of the Montana departments of Environmental Quality, Natural Resources and Conservation, and Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Governor Brian Schweitzer stated that, "Development along rivers and streams that destroys protective riparian areas is possibly the single most urgent ecosystem threat facing Montana today."

According to the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, Montana has lost approximately 27 percent of naturally occurring wetlands since settlement. Wetlands are an effective, natural method of improving water quality by removing pollutants and excessive nutrients. On Wisconsin Avenue, this equates to buffering the impacts of urban runoff, construction and faulty septic systems.

Wetland buffering includes a biological process of nutrient uptake and de-nitrification. Physically, the wetland serves as an effective filter of sediment. These processes allow wetlands to remove, transform and store excessive nutrients and pollutants.

In 1984, research conducted by the Flathead Lake Biological Station showed signs that Viking Creek, which flows through the Wisconsin Avenue Wetlands, and the shoreline area of the lake to be chronically

affected by groundwater contamination from nearby developments.

"The Wisconsin Avenue wetlands are a kidney to Whitefish Lake. They quietly work every day without lipstick to improve water quality."

We also know that there is a high relative density of septic systems in the Northwoods area off of Reservoir Road. The area is also the headwaters to one of the streams that flow through the wetlands. I suspect nutrient loading to the lake would be much worse if the wetlands were not there.

But enough of this science mumbo jumbo, let's talk money. What do the Wisconsin Avenue Wetlands mean to our pocketbooks?

Since the wetlands and the City's drinking water intake pipe are located in and around Monk's Bay, it is important to have the wetlands complete an initial filtration of nutrients and pollutants. This, in turn, reduces the cost of treating our precious drinking water.

The wetlands also provide habitat for unique plant, bird, amphibian and terrestrial wildlife species in addition to interfacing open space with the city. It's hard to put a price tag on these items but they are the same qualities that make us all value the area. Collectively, they add up to attract tourists and increase property values.

The Wisconsin Avenue Wetlands could also offer an educational opportunity. If the concept of constructing a raised boardwalk through a portion of the wetlands ever came to fruition, what a great opportunity for school kids, residents and tourists alike.

The Wisconsin Avenue Wetlands are a kidney to Whitefish Lake. They quietly work every day without lipstick to improve water quality. If the opportunity presents itself to acquire and/or protect this important piece of geography, we should work together to make it happen. - Mike Koopal

Institute Receives Community Foundation Grant

The Whitefish Community Foundation recently awarded a \$1,500 grant to the Institute to support the Water Quality Monitoring Program for Whitefish Lake.

The Whitefish Community Foundation is a leader and catalyst for philanthropic giving in Whitefish. They provide flexible ways for donors to benefit the community in the areas of art, cultural, human services, education, recreation, environment and civic improvements.

Hovercraft Comes to Whitefish Lake

On Labor Day, a dedication ceremony was held at City Beach for the town's new hovercraft.

The \$33,000 rescue vehicle was donated to the Whitefish Fire Department by Whitefish Lake Institute board member Jim Stack and his wife Lisa, and Mike and Marie Shaw.

The hovercraft is named Julia, after Julia Cassidy of England, who drowned in Whitefish Lake seven years ago during an early April boating mishap.

Julia's sister, Claire, made the trip from England for the dedication. Her family also donated \$11,000 toward the cost of the hovercraft hanger.

In total, nearly \$30,000 in donated labor and materials went towards the construction of the hanger by local contractors and businesses, and the City of Whitefish.



The rescue hovercraft will be especially helpful for cold water rescues between October and April when the lake can be partially covered by ice. The 911 response time goal is six minutes from a call to hovercraft launch.

Jim Stack responded to the cries of Julia and her boyfriend Randall Bruckner at midnight seven years ago in his kayak. He was able to save Bruckner but not Julia. Jim was later awarded a Carnegie Medal in "recognition of an outstanding act of heroism" for the rescue. –MK

Pick up the November/December issue of Flathead Living Magazine for an article about the Institute.



The Institute is looking for Santa's helpers this Holiday Season!

Having a hard time finding that perfect holiday gift for someone? How about giving them a membership to the Institute? They will receive all the member benefits while you'll get credit for a tax-deductible donation. Along with your donation, simply tell us who the membership will be for, and we'll send them a letter acknowledging your gift. Also, don't forget that we have laminated bathymetric (topographic) maps of Whitefish Lake on sale for \$15, plus \$3 shipping.

The Institute is also seeking financial support in other ways. It is our goal in 2007 to hire a part-time scientist to spearhead our increasing workload on the lake, and we would also like to build our Endowment Fund. We are also looking for a 20 foot trailer to tow our pontoon boat. Your holiday cheer would be much appreciated!

Institute Membership

Research Guarantor (\$1,000 and above)

Dick and Sandra Boyce– Portola Valley, CA
 John and Anne Collins- Whitefish, MT
 Bill and Ruth Leonard- Whitefish, MT
 Plum Creek Timber Company- Columbia Falls, MT
 RE/MAX of Whitefish– Whitefish, MT
 Scott and Cindy Schmid– Portland, OR

Lake Visionary (\$500)

Richard and Carol Atkinson– Whitefish, MT
 Nick and Karen Chickering– Nevada City, CA

Mark and Constance Cowett– Bozeman, MT
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 Charles Lyman– Whitefish, MT
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 River Design Group, Inc.– Whitefish, MT
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 PBS&J Consulting- Missoula, MT
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Name _____

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- Endowment Fund (\$500 +)
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