



Welcome to the River to Lake newsletter.

A Quarterly Newsletter

Issue 14 | May 2012

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Conservation and Restoration

New Conservation Project on Flathead River

By Mark Schiltz

Eric and Rebecca Smith recently completed a conservation project that protects 97 acres of exceptional riparian habitat on the Flathead River.

The Smiths worked with the Montana Land Reliance to place a conservation easement on their property east of Kalispell and north of McWeneger Slough along the main stem and numerous side channels of the river.

The property is situated in a well-established conservation neighborhood that includes a number of other conservation easements, including one donated by Eric and Becca in 2000.

The thick stand of black cottonwood and Engelmann spruce along the braided river channels supports a wide variety of waterfowl and other bird species. When asked about the wildlife seen on the property, Eric commented, "It's more a question of what wildlife we haven't seen! The presence of the river and the wildlife it supports defines what we love about our property and why we chose to live here."

Becca says "It's comforting to know that long after we are gone someone else will walk this property and enjoy it as much as we have, unspoiled and undeveloped."

The conservation easement was purchased in part with funds from a North American Wetlands Conservation

Act grant administered by the Flathead Land Trust. In addition to Eric, Becca and MLR, the project combined the efforts of FLT, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and other River to Lake Initiative partners. Mark Schiltz, MLR western manager, concluded, "The general health of the Flathead River impacts the entire community. Working together on this project has been very rewarding and adds one more piece to the puzzle of how to permanently improve water quality in the valley."

Volunteers help protect and restore riparian vegetation at Foys Bend

River to Lake Initiative partners and volunteers helped Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) staff fence several areas at the Foys Bend Fisheries Conservation Area where new trees will be planted this spring. Cottonwood trees near the river banks were individually fenced to protect them from beavers.



Deer browsing is one of the biggest problems and can ruin an entire restoration project by eating young trees. Fencing, at least 8 ft high to exclude deer from the new restoration areas for the first five years of a project – or until trees are large enough – is critical to the success of restoration projects.

Last year, FWP fenced several large areas to see what trees would come up when protected from deer browsing. Within a year, hundreds of young aspen and

cottonwood trees were coming up – volunteer shoots from older trees nearby. This natural restoration method is providing a great – and inexpensive – start to restoring riparian vegetation at this site.

Conservation Progress



Over the last 10 years, landowners have partnered with the River to Lake Initiative to conserve over 5,000 acres of critical lands along the Flathead River and the north shore of Flathead

Lake. These lands not only are special to the landowners, who often can claim three or four generations of stewardship, but they are also critical for clean water, fish and wildlife habitat, scenery and soil productivity.

What has been accomplished?

Historically, public lands managed by the county, state and federal governments were the only lands protected along the river and the north shore. The River to Lake Initiative has changed the conservation landscape. Currently, of about 11,000 acres protected, 6,400 acres (58%) are conserved by private landowners. River to Lake Initiative partners have helped landowners and the state protect over 5,050 acres since the initiative's beginning.

A significant amount of critical lands are protected

An evaluation of all protected areas (public and private) in the River to Lake focus area showed that the following have been protected:

- 41% of the 100-year floodplain
- 58% of quality riparian areas that provide fish and wildlife habitat and filter pollutants from runoff
- 51% of the wetlands
- 43% of the areas overlying shallow groundwater
- 29% of the banks along the Flathead River's main channel, and
- 34% of the corridor's important agricultural soils.

These conservation accomplishments have only been possible due to the commitment of landowners and the willingness of partners to work together to plan and implement projects – a complex undertaking. Like a puzzle, individual projects are now coming together to form a network of conservation that benefits people, wildlife and clean water now and for the future.

Events

May 15-17

“Get Out!”

Flathead High School students will mentor local elementary students at Owen Sowerwine Natural Area through a nature education and community service project that includes pulling weeds and other activities. *Get Out!* is sponsored by the Flathead Conservation District, Flathead Audubon and the Crown of the Continent Ecosystem Education Consortium. To learn more or enroll your school, contact Patti Mason, Flathead Conservation District Education & Outreach Specialist at 752-4220.

June 8-10

Montana Audubon's Annual Bird Festival

Montana Audubon and the Flathead Audubon Society are hosting the *Wings Across the Big Sky Bird Festival* at the Hilton Garden Inn in Kalispell. The festival offers several workshops and field trips including a *River to Lake Initiative* field trip that highlights conservation projects along the Flathead River and the North Shore of Flathead Lake. For more information visit www.mtaudubon.org/birdwatching/festival.html.

June 30

Living by Water Workshop

The Flathead Lakers are offering a Living by Water Workshop and tour for lakeshore landowners on Saturday, June 30 in Rollins.

Participants will learn about the importance of shoreline buffers in maintaining water quality and actions they can take to protect clean water. For more information contact Christi Buffington, Flathead Lakers Education & Outreach Coordinator, at 883-1341.



July 26

Flathead Lakers Annual Meeting

Join the Flathead Lakers Thursday, July 26 to celebrate River to Lake Initiative conservation achievements, honor landowners who have completed conservation projects, learn about the state of the lake, and enjoy a social gathering on the lakeshore. This evening meeting will be held at the Flathead Lake Biological Station at Yellow Bay. For more information visit the Flathead Lakers' website at www.flatheadlakers.org or contact Robin Steinkraus, Executive Director, at 883-1346.