



# TROUT LINE

Newsletter from the Montana Council of Trout Unlimited



Volunteer Patti Bartlett helps July Luem tie his first fly at MTU's 2023 Conservation Youth Camp

**SUMMER 2023**

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### MONTANA TU'S MISSION

is to conserve, protect and restore Montana's world-class coldwater fisheries and their watersheds.

Founded in 1964, Montana Trout Unlimited is a statewide grassroots organization comprised of 13 chapters and approximately 4,000 TU members.

[www.montanatu.org](http://www.montanatu.org)

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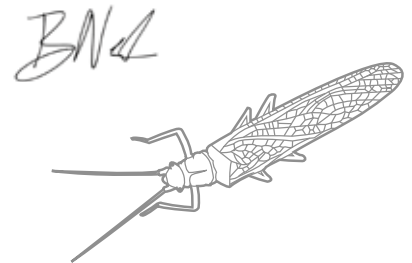
As a long-time, guide and outfitter, one of my goals in working with MTU is to get the Montana guiding community more involved in the conservation of our cold-water fisheries. This involves increasing awareness of the incredible work MTU does to protect the rivers that provide so much joy for a variety of recreationalists. Several years ago, my friend and fellow outfitter Tim Linehan reached out to me with an idea for a fundraiser for MTU that would do just that. The idea is called "Tip of the Hat" (TOTH). The ask is for guides to simply donate one tip, one day of the year. We got the ball rolling and despite skipping a year due to severe drought and omitting the year of Covid, guides from across the state have raised more than \$35,000 for MTU through TOTH.

This year we celebrated TOTH once again. The epicenter for the event occurs on the Missouri River. Guides from across the state arrive on the MO in spring and work through early summer, which creates a great opportunity to spread the word. This year, the generous folks at The Trout Shop in Craig donated and barbequed ribs and brisket. MTU staff made the trip to Craig to collect donations, talk conservation and thank the generous guides on the Missouri. As guides rolled off the water, funds were collected, food was consumed and, as usual with my fellow guides, many laughs were had. The turnout in Craig was excellent, including some new faces dropping off their hard-earned gratuity. The Tip of the Hat fundraiser has been a



MTU State Council Chairman Brian Neilsen

success in both raising money to protect Montana's rivers and increase awareness in the guiding and outfitting community. I am incredibly grateful for my fellow friends and guides across Montana. Guide tips are still rolling in, so stay tuned for a full list of these folks in our fall newsletter, and when you book a Montana fishing trip, please consider one of these conservation-minded guides. Thank you guides and outfitters for your continued support!



## HELP PROTECT WILD TROUT

<b>80° - 69°</b> FISH FEEL THE HEAT Find colder water	<b>68° - 66°</b> STRESSED OUT TROUT Keep fish in the water	<b>65° - 55°</b> HAPPY TROUT Fish Responsibly
<b>ALWAYS</b>		
Wet hands before handling fish. Minimize air exposure. Use barbless hooks.	Allow fish to recover before release. Carry a stream thermometer. Use extreme caution with bull trout > 60°	

**MONTANA  
TROUT  
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## Project to benefit Centennial Arctic grayling approved by David Brooks



In early June the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge released a final decision notice that approved a project to benefit overwintering habitat for Arctic grayling (*Thymallus arcticus*) in Upper Red Rock Lake (URRL). Tucked into the northern shadow of the Centennial Mountain range in southwestern Montana, the Red Rock Lakes NWR is home to the only adfluvial population of grayling that still exists in the lower 48 States. These iconic salmonids with their iridescent coloring and sail-like dorsal fin spend their winter under the ice and snow cover of URRL. Due to the shallowness of that lake and the often long, hard winters, oxygen dwindles as it is consumed by fish and decaying plants. After decades of study, the Refuge, along with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS), have identified critically low oxygen levels as the bottleneck for grayling survival in this system.

Because the agencies have clearly determined that overwintering habitat is the limiting factor causing the recent and significant decline in the Centennial grayling population, the Refuge has approved building a pipeline from the nearby Shambow Pond (an impoundment of a tributary to URRL) to gravity-feed well-oxygenated water to the center and deepest portion of URRL during the winter. The Refuge decision was based on years of research, modeling and pilot-

project testing that culminated in the last years' worth of multi-agency evaluation and environmental assessment. Winnowing down from many potential projects, the Refuge selected the Shambow Pipeline project because of its likelihood of fostering grayling persistence and potential recovery, as well as its minimal and short-term impacts to Wilderness and other Refuge habitat. As Refuge Manager Mike Bryant put it in the official press release about this win for grayling, "It strikes a balance between effectiveness for the population and minimal impact on wilderness."

Since the first efforts to identify the reasons for the grayling declines, MTU has advocated for the research that pinpointed overwinter habitat as the limiting factor. We have continued to engage closely with the Refuge, USFWS and FWP on possible solutions and strongly supported the EA process, as well as the final decision to install the Shambow Pond pipeline. We have and will continue to help raise funds to support this invaluable grayling recovery work and look forward to seeing the project implemented later this summer!

As next winter locks the Centennial Valley in ice and snow, it will be gratifying to know that we successfully helped make the dark, cold waters of URRL a more life-giving, rather than threatening environment for one of Montana's and the earth's iconic salmonids. Thank you to the

FWS, Red Rock Lakes Refuge and FWP staff, as well as all friends of the grayling who have helped make this happen.

Unfortunately, in the three weeks since the Refuge approved this important native fish recovery project, a coalition of groups filed a lawsuit in federal court (in Missoula) to halt the effort. Wilderness Watch, Alliance for the Wild Rockies, Gallatin Wildlife Association and the Yellowstone to Uintas Connection are claiming incorrectly that burying the pipeline across a short stretch of designated Wilderness (less than a quarter mile of open grassland and willow habitat adjacent to URRL) violates the Wilderness Act and that the FWS failed to address the associated impacts properly. The court has not issued a statement about whether or not it will hear this case.

We anticipate that the thoroughness of the structured decision-making process and environmental analysis that went into the project selection will prevail. Our mission to care for native coldwater fisheries certainly includes care for designated Wilderness areas. That's one reason this project is so important. It is critical to protecting and restoring one of the most iconic aspects of the Red Rocks Wilderness Area, its native Arctic grayling. The Wilderness Act explicitly allows for actions like this, actions that provide long-term, critical benefits to fish, wildlife and habitat with minimal and short-term impacts to the Wilderness.

For more information, always feel free to contact MTU. To read the decision release with a link to the final EA: <https://www.fws.gov/press-release/2023-06/red-rock-lakes-nwr-releases-final-ea-arctic-grayling-overwintering-habitat>

For more on Arctic grayling characteristics and life history: <https://fieldguide.mt.gov/speciesDetail.aspx?elcode=AFCHA07010#:~:text=The%20Montana%20Arctic%20grayling%20has,or%20purple%20spots%20and%20markings.>





## What is MTU doing about SW Montana trout populations? by Clayton Elliott

Early this summer, biologists with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) presented stark findings of this year's surveys for brown and rainbow trout indicating that populations in some of Montana's most iconic rivers have declined to nearly the 5th percentile of existing data ranges. The news shook many anglers and conservationists. We at MTU share the concern about historically low fish population estimates on rivers across southwest Montana, including the Big Hole, Beaverhead, and Ruby rivers. What is now clear is that these numbers are part of a multi-year trend across the region directly correlated with prolonged periods of drought and poor water supply, especially in the late season.

We, like most everyone else who was paying attention, began searching for a clearer understanding of the data presented and potential primary and secondary drivers of the alarming population trend. To that end, MTU hosted a meeting with Fishing Outfitters Association of Montana (FOAM) in Butte on June 7th and invited biologists and leadership at FWP, the MT Chapter of the American Fisheries Society, as well as scientific experts in the area. More than fifty concerned members of the public attended and participated in the lively discussion that led us to believe that more dialogue between stakeholders would need to be a priority as we navigate this shared problem.

In an immediate response, FWP staff proposed a set of emergency fishing regulations to ensure that anglers are not further contributing to population level losses on these rivers. Along with FOAM we supported proactive emergency fishing regulations in front of the Fish and Wildlife Commission on June 8th. We applauded their adoption for all three rivers. Fishing regulations alone are not going to solve the problems facing these rivers, but they are a start and help insure that responsible recreational angling is causing no further harm.

As of now, nearly all of us on staff at MTU are directly engaging nearly every day with agency leadership at FWP, the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, and the Department of



Jeff Lukas watches a storm move across the upper Big Hole in 2009, when trout populations were more robust.

Environmental Quality, as well as in regular communications with the Governor's office, key legislative partners, the public and commercial angling businesses. These conversations are laying the groundwork of better information gathering and sharing, as well as properly dedicating more resources to solving the complex problems in southwest Montana. MTU staff, along with partners, are closely studying the fish sampling results to assess continued research and resource needs, along with FWP staff and biologists. Further, we are engaging with them to ensure robust adaptive management plans and thoughtful future study designs. We have been standing alone in the legislature advocating for more resources and creative policy frameworks to boost instream flows and put more water in the rivers when and where it is needed, and this legislature gave agencies and partners additional, dedicated funding and policy improvements to move the needle on these priorities. Now is the time to use them.

At this point, we know that there is no silver bullet to recovery. We need a series of good water years that help support viable late season cold water habitat. In the meantime, we need to find more ways to work with all water users to conserve the water we do have, so that more of it stays in the stream in late summer and fall. MTU will

continue to focus on what we know will move the needle, improving fish habitat and building a more resilient water system. For more information on the innovative work that we are doing on that front see Chris Edgington's story in this edition. The bottom line is this - MTU stands ready to work with any and all stakeholders to find collaborative solutions to increasing streamflow and recovering trout populations in southwest Montana. It will take time and true collaboration for these rivers to recover, but with enough perseverance and your help we will get there.



### MTFWP PUBLIC COMMENT OPPORTUNITES

Two major management documents will be released in August by Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) guiding fisheries management for the years to come. On August 7th officials will release the draft Statewide Fisheries Management Plan and associated Environmental Assessment, and on August 23rd the draft biennial Montana Fishing Regulations will be released. Both will have open public comment periods through the end of September and the Department will be hosting public open houses in all seven regions the last two weeks of August. Stay tuned and be sure to make your voice heard in the process!

## Building Resiliency in the Jefferson watershed by Chris Edgington



MTU's Chris Edgington cleaning out a fish ladder at a diversion on a tributary of the lower Jefferson River.

It's no secret that, across Montana, the rivers we celebrate and cherish are facing increasing pressures and threats. For nearly 60 years, Montana Trout Unlimited has worked in virtually every major trout-bearing watershed in the state to build resiliency through advocacy, education, on-the-ground projects, and policies. Improving coldwater fisheries including everything from leasing water rights from landowners for instream flow to new techniques for mimicking beaver dams to increase floodplain water storage and, hence, enhance late summer flows with cool water. This kind of work has never been more critical.

In the last few years, we ratcheted up these efforts in the Jefferson drainage where we are building resiliency into the system with a multitude of projects to improve the availability of cold water, increase spawning habitat for wild trout, restore fish passage, and native fish restoration. It's a daunting task in a vast drainage with lots of competing interests. Thankfully, there are examples to help guide our work. In the 1980's the Blackfoot corridor was suffering from decades of intense logging, legacy mining, and land conversion for agriculture. The watershed was out of balance and the fishery was fragmented at best and depleted to near non-existence in places. A systematic recovery plan was developed by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Park's biologist, Ron Pierce, in coordination with the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service, private landowners, and the Westslope and

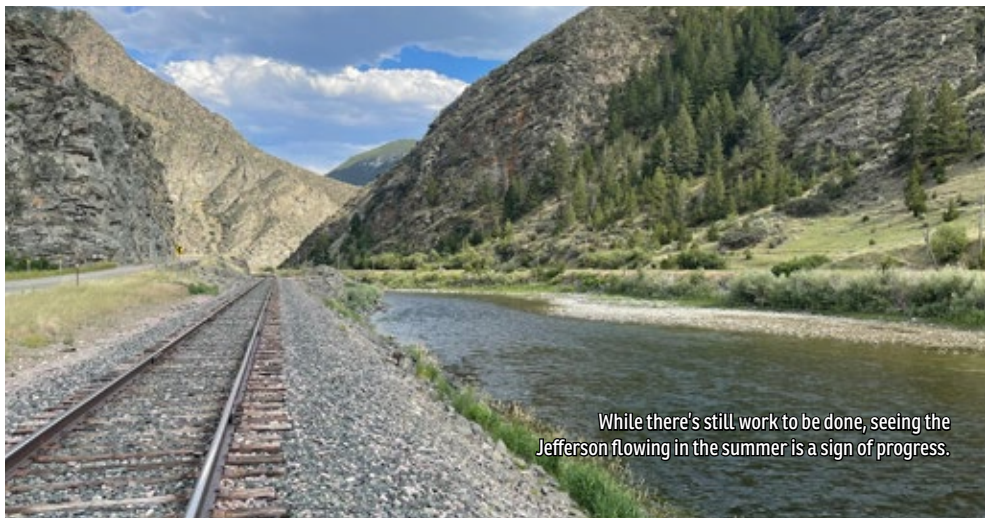
Big Blackfoot chapters of TU. After more than forty years of a concerted effort by hundreds of individuals, multiple agencies, and scores of projects led by TU, the Blackfoot Watershed is a place of resiliency for wild and native fish.

Increasing the availability of cold water in the Jefferson Watershed is MTU's highest priority in the basin. The recent drought and historically low fish counts have heightened the urgency for this work. Fortunately, there are opportunities to improve flows and fisheries resiliency. We are completing our due diligence on a recent prospect to improve irrigation efficiency while exchanging stable, cold spring creek water (currently used for irrigation) for warmer Jefferson River water. It is a proven tactic we are employing with a traditional ag-producer

on the lower Boulder River near Cardwell where we'll exchange their much-colder Boulder River irrigation water right with Jefferson Slough water, which is the warmest water in the basin. We are also laboring to restore fish passage for thermal refugia and access to spawning habitat on the Boulder River. Our advocacy for increasing storage on the Ruby Reservoir is beginning to revive a significant instream flow project that has languished for over a decade. On our Willow Springs Creek spawning habitat project which was completed in November 2021, spring redd counts showed a marked increase in Rainbow trout redds.

In the last four years, we have secured over 20 miles of headwater streams for the benefit of Westslope Cutthroat trout in Southwest Montana. Our nearly three-year effort with state and federal agencies to support the improvement of overwintering habitat for aboriginal Arctic grayling in Upper Red Rock Lake recently culminated with a Decision Notice. We anticipate moving forward with this vital project which will deliver highly-oxygenated spring water to deeper portions of the lake to save wild fish.

Building resilience in a watershed takes time and coordination. MTU is here, diligently building long-lasting relationships with landowners, stakeholders, and agencies. We are grateful for the support of our members and donors who trust us to play the long game and build resilience into our cherished rivers.



While there's still work to be done, seeing the Jefferson flowing in the summer is a sign of progress.



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# Conservation Youth Camp Spotlight

## 20 young anglers enjoy our 22nd Conservation Youth Camp



We had a terrific week for our 22nd Conservation Youth Camp! Twenty 11-14 year olds joined MTU staff and volunteers once again at Camp Watanopa on Georgetown Lake in the Anaconda-Pintler Mountains. In addition to instruction in fly angling, campers visited an active stream restoration project in the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, where we built beaver dam analogs to improve wild trout habitat. We also met with MT Fish Wildlife and Parks fish culturists and fisheries biologists, toured the Washoe Park Fish Hatchery and so much more. Thank you to all our sponsors, especially Orvis, Yellow Dog CCF, AFFTA, and Tom Mocilac. If you're interested in volunteering in 2024, contact Outreach Coordinator and Camp Director Bill Pfeiffer at [bill@montanatu.org](mailto:bill@montanatu.org).

# Chapter News

## Big Blackfoot Chapter

BBCTU received good news on fund raising in June and July. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management awarded funding totaling over \$1.9 Million for habitat projects across the Blackfoot Watershed. We will have five years to spend the funds on a wide range of projects including stream and riparian restoration, fish passage and road decommissioning. BBCTU also received a \$100,000 donation from a private foundation. Nevada Creek Phase 6 is moving forward. Bid packages from three contractors were received in early July and construction will begin in August. Numerous other habitat projects are also scheduled for this summer.

## Joe Brooks Chapter

The chapter is planning a gathering after the Upper Yellowstone River Clean Up on Sept. 16, 2023 and is encouraging those seeking to get more involved with the Chapter to attend. Our kickoff party will take place at the Civic Center/Bandshell. More details on the way in the next few weeks. The chapter is now operating under an interim board of directors. We plan to announce official board elections for the fall, so if you're interested in joining or volunteering on upcoming projects and events, please see us at the party. The Joe Brooks Chapter board members help to guide our work and develop new programs and projects for our local area. If you're interested in getting more involved in the Livingston area, please email Matt Swann at swannmatt@yahoo.com.

## Madison-Gallatin Chapter

MGTU will host the Annual Lower Madison River Clean Up on Saturday, August 19th from 9:00 - 1:00. We are looking forward to sprucing up our beloved river. All volunteers should meet at Warm Springs Access at 9:00 AM for a brief safety talk, clean up directions, paperwork, and raffle tickets. After volunteers are done cleaning up their assigned section, they should swing by Trapper Springs Pavilion where we will have free lunch and beverages. Participants can also see if they won a prize with their raffle tickets! If you would like to make a raffle donation, have questions, or need more information about this year's clean up,

please contact: Travis Morris 406.599.3356 (cell) or [travis@hartmontgomery.com](mailto:travis@hartmontgomery.com) MGTU Veterans Service Partnership hosted a group for a day of fly fishing on the Lower Madison on June 15th. We are hosting another fishing day on July 29th on the Yellowstone River. We continue to partner with Project Healing Waters on these fun outings. If you are interested in helping out with our Veterans Program events, please contact MGTU Board Member, Andy Moore at [andy.m@moduluscorp.com](mailto:andy.m@moduluscorp.com)

## NATIONAL LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

On April 1, NLC leadership transitioned to Rich Thomas (DE) as Chair and Sharon Sweeney Fee (MT) as Secretary. As a result, MTU has a second seat on the NLC held by Mark Peterson (MT). NLC holds regular business meetings with the 36 NLC Representatives and creates Town Halls for all members. One recently held was on TU's "Priority Waters" initiative, videos are available, just search TU and Priority Waters. Finally, a major focus of the new NLC Leadership is to move all the NLC work groups toward annual, measurable goals. One that was just implemented is an article from one NLC work group each month, posted in TU's Friday newsletter "Lines to Leaders".



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Ask for it at your local county treasurer's office when you renew your registration or if you purchase a new vehicle!

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# TROUT LINE SUMMER 2023

## UPCOMING EVENTS

[www.montanatu.org](http://www.montanatu.org)

**7/29/23** Veterans Fishing Day - MGTU & PHW  
Bozeman, MT

**8/19/23** Lower Madison River Clean Up - MGTU  
Bozeman, MT

**8/19/23** Chuck Robbins Summer BBQ  
Dillon, MT

**9/16/23** Yellowstone Clean Up and JBTU Party  
Livingston, MT

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