



# TROUT LINE

Newsletter from the Montana Council of Trout Unlimited

Floaters on a canoe trip on Montana's  
Smith River in October.

FALL 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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In late September, with fall colors on display, I drove to Utica, and the Circle Bar Guest Ranch for Montana Trout Unlimited's bi-annual State Council retreat. Chapter leaders from across the state dedicated a day to tour a recently completed road relocation and stream restoration project on the Middle Fork of the Judith, in addition to sharing our successes and challenges during our day-long meeting. I opted for the walking tour with MTU Executive Director David Brooks to stretch my legs for the upcoming upland bird season. We hiked about a mile, descending into and across the Yogo Creek tributary through sagebrush and ponderosa pine arriving at the first of several restored stream crossings on the river. The Middle Fork's beautiful limestone canyons and hard corners with deep pools along cliff walls are reminiscent of the Smith River. Everyone mentioned wishing we'd brought rods, even though we knew we'd left them behind because the Middle Fork trout fishery has been devastated by years of habitat damage and sediment loading due to heavy use of an OHV road regularly criss-crossing the stream. Throughout the hike we surveyed nearly 50 rehabilitated road crossings that occurred in just the space of a few river miles, replaced by woody debris, willows and other native riparian plants, the work of MTU Project Manager Chris Edgington and partners. In the coming years the trout will be moving into the repaired section of this beautiful stream thanks to this great project.

Seeing such rapid progress on the Middle Fork reminded me of the importance of our partnership-driven, science-based approach to cold water conservation. In the Judith, we relied on the expertise of Lewis & Clark National Forest rangers and planners, who did the groundwork to make restoration possible. The project also benefited from our collaboration



MTU State Council Chair Brian Neilsen

with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP), Montana Department of Environmental Quality, fellow conservation partners and local residents. You'll also hear in this issue about FWP biologist Matt Jaeger, a long-time collaborator on our work, who was recently recognized with a national award by TU for his commitment to native fish. The kind of sound science and teamwork that has made the Middle Fork project such a success will also be essential to recovering trout populations in southwest Montana (see Clayton Elliott's update on pg. 4). They're also the cornerstone of the Arctic Grayling Recovery Program MTU recently took over which you can read about on the next page. Whenever I drive across Montana for work, for MTU State Council meetings, to fish or chase birds, I am reminded by the landscape and watersheds of the long history of MTU projects and efforts rooted in pragmatic solutions to dynamic problems for our fisheries and made possible by our staff, volunteers, generous donors and many, many partners. The Middle Fork is the most recent reminder of what is possible when we all work together.

*BN*



Thank you to Circle Bar Guest Ranch for hosting our 2023 MT State Council Retreat!

## MTU Partners on New Efforts for Native Fish in SW Montana by David Brooks

Back in July, MTU officially committed to help facilitate more native fish restoration in southwest Montana. By signing “Cooperative Agreement #MTU01” with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP), we will take on the role of helping to put funding from the US Fish and Wildlife Service and FWP’s joint Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program on the ground to benefit Westslope cutthroat trout (WCT) and Arctic grayling. This means that we will increase our engagement with these two agencies as they identify, evaluate and implement stream and riparian restoration work aimed at conserving and expanding grayling populations, as well as achieving the state’s goal of restoring WCT to 20% of their historic range in the upper Missouri watershed.

By focusing on habitat restoration, the work accomplished through this 7-year agreement will benefit water quality and quantity, hence enriching wild trout in

many places in the Big Hole, Ruby, Jefferson and Red Rock Rivers. As is common practice, conserving and restoring native fish in some places will mean eliminating or reducing populations of nonnative fish, primarily brook trout; in other places increasing good trout habitat or keeping more cold water in a stream will be to the good of wild rainbow and brown trout, too.

Tucked up under this agreement, MTU will also be taking over the Arctic Grayling Recovery Program (AGRP). AGRP has worked for more than three decades to conserve grayling in southwest Montana by engaging FWP and USFWS, as well as landowners and NGOs. To date, AGRP has been instrumental in assisting with more than 500 projects to benefit grayling in the Big Hole and Ruby River, as well as the Centennial Valley. In the Big Hole, AGRP’s involvement with FWP and USFWS on the grayling Candidate Conserva-

tion Agreement with Assurances (CCAA) has enrolled many large landowners and water users in the upper valley to improve conditions for grayling spawning, rearing and survival, making this the “poster child” for similar programs across the country.

As the new AGRP coordinator, MTU will oversee the allocation of federal money from the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program to approved projects specifically for grayling in Montana. Since its inception, longtime MTU volunteer leader Buddy Drake has run the AGRP. His hand-off of that Program to MTU will come with his generous offer to help MTU expand our focus on grayling and oversee the successful Program he has been running. We are extremely excited to be partnering with these two agencies and the science-driven staff they bring to the work of taking care of some of our most iconic native fish.



## FWP’s Matt Jaeger Honored by Trout Unlimited at CX3 by Chris Edgington

In Montana, fisheries biologists are the backbone of wild and native trout management. Conserving and restoring fisheries health and resilience requires a unique balance of data collection and analysis, understanding of laws, the ability to convey information to a plethora of stakeholders, determination and grit.

In southwest Montana, trout and grayling are fortunate to have a talented and dynamic biologist in Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks’ Matt Jaeger (FWP). On September 30, in Spokane, Washington at Trout Unlimited’s Annual gathering, Matt was awarded TU’s 2023 Conservation Professional of the Year. More than 300 attendees celebrated Matt’s unwavering dedication to coldwater conservation.

“I’m honored and humbled by this award,” Matt said. “I’ve been fortunate to be a part of a lot of great teams throughout my career and there’s nowhere else in the world I’d rather be doing it than here in Montana.”

In his career as a fisheries biologist for FWP, Jaeger has been a champion of Mon-



tana’s native fish, a critical partner among diverse stakeholders, and a powerful advocate for hard science informing wild fish management and recovery actions.

Since 2021, Matt has shared his concerns at public meetings about the declining Brown trout populations across the Jefferson Basin, concerns that are just now grabbing headlines. In response to the decline in Brown trout numbers, along with his FWP Region 3 colleagues, Matt brought forward critical protective regulation changes to the Fish and Game

Commission and an iterative Brown trout adaptive management plan based on fish population sampling data for the Statewide Fisheries Management Plan.

In addition, Matt’s work on behalf of native trout species is extensive. He leads a multiagency, interdisciplinary coalition that developed the Westslope Cutthroat Trout Conservation Strategy for the Missouri River Headwaters of Southwest Montana. This Conservation Strategy encompasses 17,378 sq. miles of the Upper Missouri drainage and includes the Beaverhead, Big Hole, Boulder, Gallatin, Jefferson, Madison, Red Rock, Ruby, and Upper Missouri River sub-basins. Over the last decade, Matt has been instrumental in adaptive management strategies and conservation planning to protect and recover populations of Montana’s Arctic grayling, a rare, endemic population in the lower 48 found exclusively in the Upper Missouri River Basin of southwest Montana.

The list of Matt’s accomplishments could fill pages. Congrats, Matt! Well deserved!





## Updates on Fisheries Research in SW Montana by Clayton Elliott



FWP biologists measure an adult brown trout during fall population surveys.

MTU commended news this summer of a multi-year agreement between Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Montana State University, and the National Fish Health Center in Bozeman for doctoral research in three major areas directed at understanding population-level declines of fish in southwest Montana.

First is a comprehensive study on fish mortality in the Upper Missouri drainage that will seek to better understand why more fish seem to be dying from disease or pathogens, stress, and other natural causes. Second, and perhaps most important, is a study to better understand and document

the complete life history of fish in these systems, specifically where they are spawning, where juvenile fish are reared, and how they are using refugia in periods of low and warm water. This work will directly inform decades of future restoration and instream flow enhancement work by focusing on priority tributaries that are the nurseries for recruitment of fish in the system. Lastly, researchers will seek to better inform our understanding of the role of angler impact on trout, investigating things like catch and release mortality, or how types of fishing tackle and pressure affect fisheries at the population level.

These studies taken together will be transformational in directing shared priorities for conservation and restoration of the southwest Montana fisheries. We look forward to supporting these efforts, sharing the findings, and putting those findings into actions that restore trout populations in the Big Hole, Jefferson, Ruby and Beaverhead Rivers to historical norms.



## EPA Grant Helps Track Clark Fork Toxins by Bri Fain, Big Sky Watershed Corps Member

This summer, I helped lead MTU's work with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to implement the Columbia River Basin Toxins Project, funded by the EPA (see Fall 2022 Trout Line for more information on this important project). The purpose of this project was to monitor toxins to inform fish consumption advisories throughout the basin, as well as to identify potential sources of toxins for future cleanup.

MTU's Maggie Althaus and I joined FWP Biologist Trevor Selch and technician Lindsey Gilstrap to install 17 passive toxin samplers in rivers throughout Western Montana. These samplers had fish tissue attached to measure the accumulation of PCBs, furans, and dioxins in the water column to test the water quality. Samplers remained in the water for 30 days, accumulating these industrial toxins. For the sites around Missoula, I recruited volunteers from local chapters and organizations like

the Clark Fork Coalition and the Bitterroot Chapter. Volunteers had the opportunity to join the monitoring efforts a few times a week to ensure samplers were undisturbed by recreationists, anglers, wildlife, and weather. Out of the seventeen samplers, sixteen were successfully recovered and sent to the lab for testing. MTU will join FWP and other project partners in analyzing the data, sharing it with the public and considering next steps in using the findings to promote a healthier Clark Fork River for fish, wildlife, and people.

As the Big Sky Watershed Corps Member placed with MTU, this opportunity is just one of many I've had this summer that have benefited Montana's trout by producing clean water and healthy rivers. I've also appreciated opportunities to work on restoration projects in the Rock/Flint Creek Watershed!



Bri Fain helps check passive water samplers and gathers valuable data for fisheries health.



Who Makes Montana TU Possible?

by Kelley Willett

Charlie has been a friend to Montana Trout Unlimited for more than a decade. He is one of thousands who make our work possible. His most recent gift revealed more of who he really is and proves that there are great people fishing Montana's rivers.

Last summer Charlie lost his wallet on the North Fork of the Flathead River. This summer, a father-son duo visiting from Canada found his wallet while they were fishing. They took the time to track him down and return the wallet to Charlie.

Montana TU received a \$150 credit card donation with this note in the memo:

*I lost my wallet in the Flathead River last summer. This week, someone found it about 20 miles downstream and returned it to me. The \$150 in cash was still there. It only seems right to return that money to the Montana trout.*

*Thanks for all you do,  
Charlie*

I'm not sure what part of this story I love most...the wallet finders taking the time to track down the owner or the intact cash coming to help the trout. I do know that all of this generosity is what makes our organization possible, and stories like this one just make us all want to work harder. We hope you're inspired too.

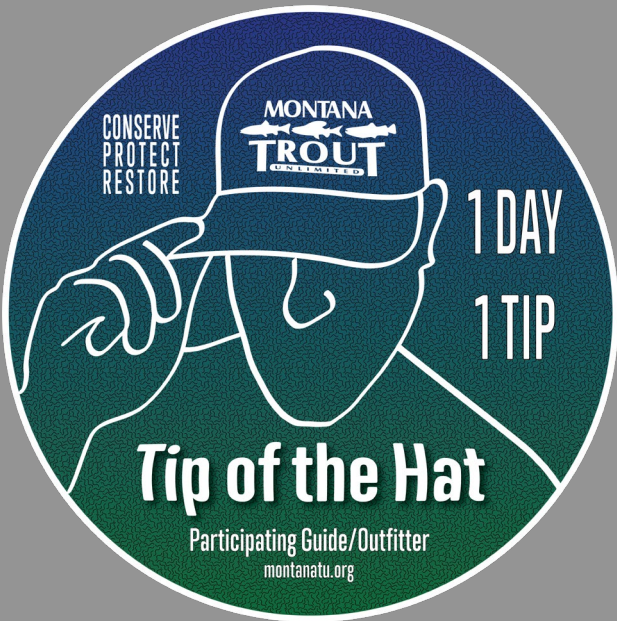


We made it even easier to help trout! Check it out!



Thank You Tip of the Hat Donors!

When you book your 2024 fishing trip, please consider one of these conservation minded guides & outfitters who supported Montana Trout Unlimited's 2023 Tip of the Hat fundraiser.



- |                   |                  |                    |                 |
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# CONSERVE. PROTECT. RESTORE.

## Celebrating the Completion of the MF Judith Project



On Sept. 22, MTU State Council members toured the freshly completed Middle Fork of the Judith road relocation and stream restoration project in the Little Belt Mountains. Jeep trail, J825, crisscrossed and was captured by the river in multiple areas, resulting in serious habitat degradation. This 5-phase project began in 2019. Over 3 miles of new sustainable forest jeep trail were completed in phases 1-4. In phases 4 and 5, 2.5 miles of riparian road was obliterated and more than 1300' of bankline was rebuilt at 68 individual entrances to 27 river ford crossings. The completion of this project will result in better wild trout habitat, a new recreational trail, preserved historic access, and a new backcountry wild trout fishery. Thank you to all our partners, especially Lewis & Clark NF!

# Chapter News

## Bitterroot Chapter

BRTU has 5 Trout in the Classroom classes now entering their 4th year. Teachers and students are still loving the program. The chapter is also starting an inventory of macroinvertebrates at several sites along the Bitterroot River. This project will also utilize our TIC classes. It is intended to last 5 years and identify and monitor trends in insect populations. Thank you to the West Slope Chapter and MTU for helping to fund this endeavor. In September, we hosted a kids fishing day for students who completed our Buggers program in middle school. Thanks to Bill Pfeiffer for helping to instruct. In October, we will be starting our winter program series. See our website and social media for specifics.

## George Grant Chapter

The chapter was mostly off for the summer, but still spent a lot of time and energy on projects. The chapter added a couple new board members who are involved in a lot of organizations and we look forward to working with them into the future. Our project at Fifer Gulch in Anaconda is moving along. Design has been completed but there are still some hurdles with flood plain permitting to be done, so we are concentrating on identifying funding for that. Stay tuned!

## Madison-Gallatin Chapter

Upper Yellowstone/Missouri Project Manager Ashley Brubaker has been hard at work this summer on a variety of projects. In the Mill Creek drainage, she will be working closely with partners on a handful of conservation projects, including a fish barrier to protect native Yellowstone cutthroat from hybridization. Design is also underway for a restoration project on Brackett Creek. MGTU has committed 3-years of funding to Ashley's position. We also had a busy summer helping veterans learn the value of fly fishing through the Veterans Service Partnership. We have a full schedule for meetings this winter. See our website for details.

## Missouri River Fly Fishers Chapter

MRF's Holiday Party will be held Dec. 29 at The Do Bar. Party starts at 6pm with live music and more. MRF has also been participating in a local working group aimed at making improvements to Wadsworth

Montana Trout Unlimited



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Get the trout license plate that matters!

(Montana Council of Trout Unlimited)

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

Pond, the community park where the Great Falls Annual Kids' Fishing Day is held. We're working with Walleyes Unlimited, Sun River Watershed Group, Great Falls Parks Department, FWP, and many others to decide how to improve this popular site. Some of the first projects will include adding permanent restrooms and working on weed control. Other suggestions have included improving fishing opportunities for youth and mobility impaired folks and enhancing the trail around the pond. If you have worked on a community pond project, we'd love to hear from you with any suggestions! Please contact Tracy at mrftu406@gmail.com.

## Westslope Chapter

In July the chapter partnered with Travelers Rest State Park on a Kids Fishing Day. We had 95 kids learning about conservation and fly fishing for a great day. Our Trout In the Classroom continues to expand, with 7 new schools this fall. On Sept. 25 the chapter held a Blackfoot River Legacies event at the Bonner Kettle House, with readings by John Maclean. This was a great event and we were proud to be a part of it! Join us for our first chapter meeting of the season Nov. 8 at 6:30pm at the Still Room in Missoula featuring Tony Reinhardt.



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# TROUT LINE FALL 2023

## UPCOMING EVENTS

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

**11/8/23** **MGTU General Meeting**  
Best Western Gran Tree, Bozeman

**12/1/23** **MT State Council Meeting**  
Virtual - Zoom Meeting

**12/29/23** **MRF Holiday Party**  
The Do Bar, Great Falls

**2/17/24** **Winter River Fest, MRF**  
The Newberry, Great Falls

**3/15/24** **George Grant Chapter Banquet**  
Butte

**WANT 5,000 MONTANA TU SUPPORTERS TO HEAR ABOUT YOUR EVENT?**

Please contact the Missoula office at 406-543-0054 or [info@montanatu.org](mailto:info@montanatu.org) to get the word out through Montana TU.



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