



TROUT LINE

Newsletter from the Montana Council of Trout Unlimited



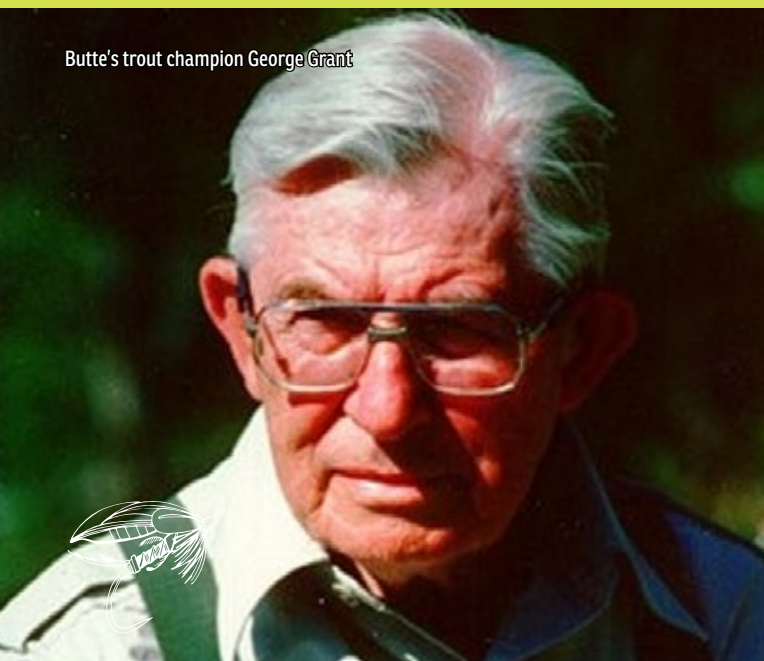
MTU cofounder Dan Bailey



Big Hole defender Tony Shoonen



MTU's first female Council Chair Sharon Sweeney Fee



Butte's trout champion George Grant

60th Anniversary and
2023 Annual Report Issue!

SPRING 2024

SPRING/24

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

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FROM THE CHAIR: Brian Neilsen

While a dry winter still has us concerned for flows this summer, spring is a wonderful time in the Northern Rockies. Migratory birds return en masse, the first green shoots follow the buttercups, and rivers rise with fresh rain and snowmelt. We dust off fishing gear and hit our favorite local spot. This spring feels all the more special for us at Montana Trout Unlimited because it marks our 60th year of conserving, protecting, and restoring our coldwater fisheries and their watersheds.

MTU founders Bud Lilly, Bud Morris, and Dan Bailey could scarcely imagine how far the organization has come in the six decades since they first met to discuss stopping proposed dam projects that could have radically transformed some of Montana's most beloved trout streams. From a small group of passionate volunteers, MTU has grown to over 5,000 members and supporters with 13 chapters in watersheds across the state. That growth has resulted from our ever-expanding understanding of what it takes to take care of trout, from preventing large dams in our mainstem rivers and supporting wild trout management, to reconnecting and restoring tributaries, as well as advocating for instream flow and preventing the spread of aquatic invasive species.

This year we're also celebrating the addition of a seventh full-time staff member, Beartooth Project Manager Katie Young. (see article on pg. 9), which will allow MTU to meet critical stream restoration needs in south central Montana watersheds. MTU's two project managers work in concert with Trout Unlimited national project managers to make our impact on habitat in Montana even bigger. The growth in our project capacity is great news for wild and native trout, and has only been possible because of the donated time, passion, and financial support of people like you.

Looking back on our past fiscal year, we've had successes and challenges alike, but our commitment to MTU's mission has never wavered. There's no question that February's Montana Supreme Court decision overturning our lower court victory on the Smith River Mine was a gut punch. We remain committed to protecting the Smith through our Mineral Withdrawal campaign to protect the public lands surrounding this special river and their myriad values from mining development (see article on pg. 4). We responded to worrying news of falling populations of wild trout in southwest



MTU State Council Chair Brian Neilsen

Montana rivers by working with our partners at Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) and local anglers to develop science-based answers to the questions posed by this decline.

Since last April, we've made significant gains with our stream restoration efforts, completing a three-year bank stabilization and road removal project in the Middle Fork of the Judith River, effectively creating a new backcountry wild trout fishery. This winter we entered into an agreement to remove a fish passage barrier on the Boulder River by 2025, a project that will benefit trout in the Jefferson during spawning migrations and warm summer flows.

Our 2023 Conservation Youth Camp was back to full capacity following the disruptions of the pandemic, with 20 campers and a nearly 1:1 camper to volunteer ratio. MTU's Maggie Althaus took on a new role as our Climate Change Coordinator, to better focus our efforts in response to warming rivers and streams, and building climate resilience.

These are just snippets of our efforts to conserve, protect, and restore Montana's coldwater streams and their watersheds over the past year. The coming year will likely present new challenges and opportunities, but we know with your support, we will continue to be a strong voice for cold, clean water and robust wild trout populations. From all of us at MTU, thank you for your support and we look forward to working with you all in the coming months.

David Brooks
Executive Director

Brian Neilsen
Council Chair

Lake trout gillnetting in Swan Lake could boost bull trout by David Brooks and Bill Pfeiffer



A large bull trout being revived and released. PC: Rob Roberts

Bull trout are one of Montana's most iconic and threatened fish. They depend on habitat with clean spawning gravels, pristine water quality, and water temperatures that stay below 60 degrees. These places are becoming harder and harder to find in our watersheds. As the climate continues to warm, these Montana natives will need us to protect refuge areas in exceptionally cold rivers and the chilly depths of mountain lakes to help them survive.

Swan Lake in northwest Montana once had a healthy enough bull trout population to allow angler harvest. That ended following the illegal introduction of lake trout into the lake. Lake trout outcompete and prey upon bull trout, and have driven bull trout populations down to historic lows. For a decade we worked on this problem with the Swan Valley Bull Trout Working Group (the Working Group), a collaborative effort with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP), United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), United States Forest Service (USFS), Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT), Flathead Valley Chapter of Trout Unlimited (FVTU), Montana Department of Natural Resource Conservation (DNRC), and others. The Working Group's main goal was to research the effectiveness of gillnetting lake trout to help protect

and restore healthy bull trout populations, but eventually no funds were allocated to continue the program.

Since this first effort, we've learned a lot more about where lake trout spawn in Swan Lake and how to most effectively net them. Recently we helped reconvene the Working Group to restart the gillnetting effort with a more targeted and sustained approach to reducing lake trout number, especially mature, spawning-age fish. Similar efforts have proven successful in Yellowstone

Lake to decrease lake trout and improve Yellowstone cutthroat populations.

Recently, FWP proposed restarting a lake trout netting program, which the Fish & Wildlife Commission unanimously approved on Feb. 16, 2024. That program will be fully running by summer 2025. USFWS has done a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis of alternatives to effectively suppress lake trout in Swan, with an emphasis on targeted gill-netting. That NEPA review will be out for public comment very soon, and we anticipate supporting the Service's commitment to this effort.

The Swan remains a stronghold for bull trout, but the redd counts have continued to decline to their lowest historic levels in 2023. Lake trout are the primary driver of that decline and gillnetting is the most appropriate, effective solution for now, and has shown to be successful when effort is sustained and substantial. Maintaining this ecosystem for the well-being of bull trout is a priority for the Working Group and, especially, MTU.

As in the past, we will be calling on volunteers to help pull nets and prepare lake trout for donation to the area food bank. If you want to lend a hand to bull trout by spending a morning or evening out on beautiful Swan Lake, stay tuned.



Invasive lake trout outcompete and prey upon bull trout in Swan Lake. Gillnetting has proven to be an effective management tool in other systems. Adobe Stock Photo

The Smith still deserves defending by David Brooks



The Smith River at Trout Creek

For more than a decade you—your time and contributions—have enabled MTU to defend the Smith River from a major mine. Thank you. Our fight continues.

In late February, the Montana Supreme Court overturned MTU and partners' lower court victory on claims filed against the mine owners and MT Department of Environmental Quality for failing to properly evaluate the risks the mine poses to water quality and quantity. The overruling reinstated Sandfire Resource's permit to develop the mine in the Smith River watershed and marked another sad example of Montana's lenient mining and permitting laws allowing for the development of a large-scale, high-risk mine to be built without proper regard for the other values of the place, including the water quality and quantity, fisheries, wildlife, recreational opportunities and cultural heritage. It is also another example of the will of the majority of Montanans, expressed in your donations, letters, phone calls, time and love for this Montana treasure being thwarted by the single value of an extractive industry and lax laws.

Despite the company holding a permit to develop the mine, our efforts to protect the Smith River persist. We cannot appeal the MT Supreme Court decision. However, we do continue to pursue our coalition's water rights claims against the mining company, a case which was heard by the MT Supreme Court as part of Montana Law Day on

March 29, 2024. At that hearing our legal team deftly argued that the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) had failed to evaluate the full amount of water the mine will use and, hence, need a permit for, as well as water rights to mitigate the impacts of its water use on Sheep Creek and, thus, the Smith River. DNRC has issued a permit to the company for less than half the 807 acre-feet per year that it must pump, store, treat and put to various uses by the company to mine copper. (One acre-foot equals 325,851 gallons, which is more than 1,000 days of water use for the average American family home!). In other words, the company gets a free pass on using approximately 457 acre-feet/year, the equivalent of more than 1,250 years of use by a Montana family. And because the company, according to DNRC, doesn't need a permit for all that water, they don't need water rights to mitigate for the impacts removing that water from the system will have on Sheep Creek, the Smith, or its fishery, either seasonally or permanently. In the coming months, we will see how the MT Supreme Court interprets Montana water law's ability to protect downstream users, the public and aquatic resources.


Finally, MTU and our partners continue to press the US Forest Service (USFS) to begin the process of withdrawing select public lands around Sheep Creek and the Smith River from future mining. If the

Black Butte mine proceeds on private land, the company clearly has plans to expand onto our public lands in the surrounding Helena and Lewis & Clark National Forest. A USFS mineral withdrawal would prevent that expansion and protect those public lands for their wealth of diverse values from fisheries to cultural resources, hunting and camping to grazing rights. We urge everyone who cares about the Smith River and public lands to sign the mineral withdrawal petition (see the QR Code below). The Smith River and its public lands are the wrong place for a mine. Our best ally in protecting these areas is you.



**SIGN THE SMITH
MINERAL
WITHDRAWAL PETITION**



 **SCAN ME**



2023 Annual Report



Rock Creek at the Microburst



EXPANDING OUR REACH IN 2023

1 new Project Manager - now 7 staff in 4 cities

1 new staff role - Climate Change Coordinator

13 local chapters

5,000+ members & supporters

10,000+ social media followers



8 Mini-grants

\$23,445 in funding

3 restoration projects

2 youth programs

3 monitoring projects

in 7 Montana watersheds

Middle Fork Judith Restoration Project



- Completed 5-phase multi-year restoration project
- Obliterated 2.5 miles of erosive road
- 1000 feet of bank restored
- 52 entrances at 17 ATV crossings removed
- Reduction of 3 tons of sediment/year

Native Trout Conservation



- WCT expanded to 10.7% in the Big Hole watershed and 5.5% in the Upper Missouri watershed towards the 20% conservation goal in partnership with multiple agencies
- Designed a project to improve genetic variability in Red Rock Lake Grayling

Smith River

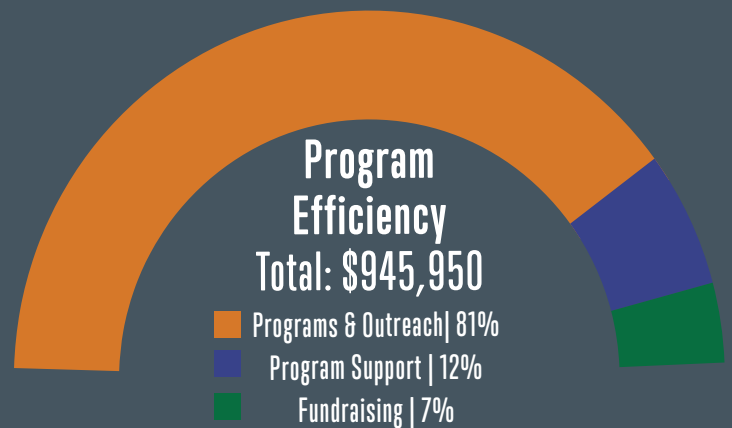
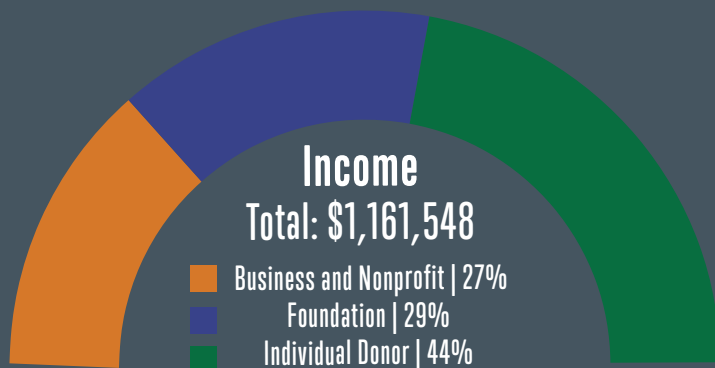


3700+ signatures

and counting in favor of a public land mineral withdrawal

SW Montana Wild Trout Recovery

- Encouraged collaboration and brought together diverse stakeholders
- Helped develop unique policy tools and funding solutions
- Advocated for 4 new scientific wild trout studies by FWP and MSU
- Developing fish habitat and fish passage projects in key tributaries
- Announced Shaw Diversion removal project on the Boulder River
- Negotiating 2 long-term water leases in critical Jefferson tributary habitat
- Working with BLM to secure long-term instream flows for newly acquired lands

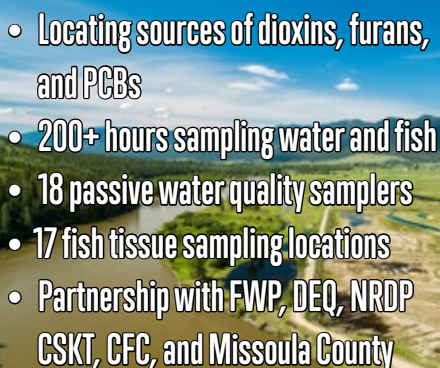


- Received our **Largest-Ever** individual gift
- Most multi-year gifts in one year
- MTU Donors in **41 of 50** states and DC

THANK YOU! Generous individuals, businesses, nonprofits, and foundations helped MTU grow in our fiscal year that ended 3.31.24. You make our work possible!

MTU's financial statements are reviewed annually by Boyle, Deveny & Meyer PC, an independent CPA firm in Missoula.

EPA Toxicity Grant for the Clark Fork

- 
- Locating sources of dioxins, furans, and PCBs
 - 200+ hours sampling water and fish
 - 18 passive water quality samplers
 - 17 fish tissue sampling locations
 - Partnership with FWP, DEQ, NRDP CSKT, CFC, and Missoula County

Youth Education



20 campers for the first time since 2019
1:1 camper/volunteer ratio
Over 100 kids reached across Montana in 2023

Celebrating 60 Years of Wild Trout Conservation, Protection, and Restoration...



Bud Lilly

Scan here to visit our history page!



SCAN ME

Grassroots conservationists hatched the idea of Montana Trout Unlimited 60 years ago. It has been the power of grassroots anglers, river lovers and conservationists that has sustained and allowed the organization to meet new challenges ever since. Even establishing and growing MTU's professional staff was orchestrated and initially funded by chapter members and leaders across the state.

From preventing dams on some of Montana's most iconic trout rivers to establishing the best-in-the-nation Stream Access Law, ensuring that Montana's streams and rivers are sustained through management and habitat improvement for wild and native trout, and working with all water users to ensure that our trout waters stay cold and clean for the next generation is the result of MTU's continued commitment to grassroots leadership and true collaboration.

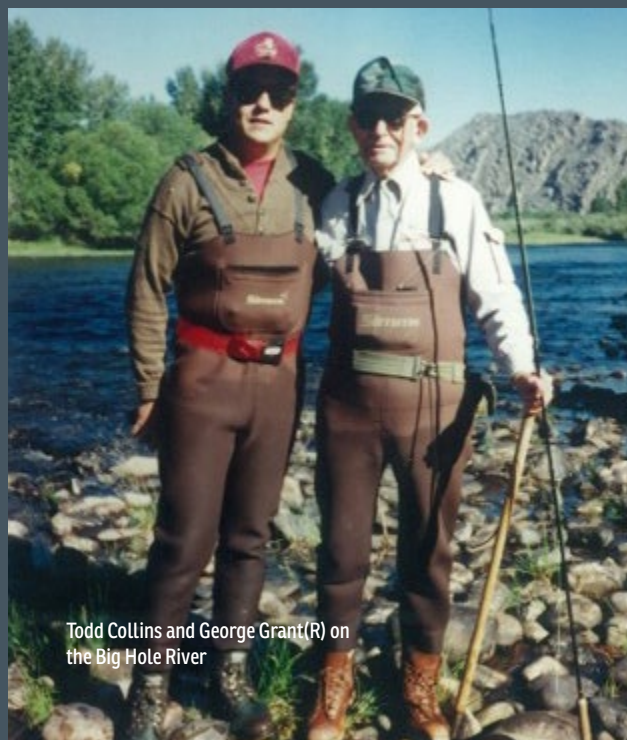
Our work to care for Montana's water resources has always, and will always be rooted in people like you, who share our mission, and devote your hard-earned time and treasure to conserving, protecting and restoring coldwater fisheries for now, and for always. Thank you!

To -

Bud Morris -

a fine angler -
and fighter for a better
outdoors.

Tight lines Bud -
Joe Brown.



Todd Collins and George Grant(R) on
the Big Hole River

Meet Katie Young: MTU's new Beartooth Project Manager by MTU Staff



Katie Young, MTU's new Beartooth Project Manager

Montana Trout Unlimited is excited to announce that we will be extending our on-the-ground project work to south central Montana. In response to the 2022 historic-level flooding that occurred downstream of the Beartooth Mountains, the Custer Gallatin National Forest (CGNF) allocated \$3 million over 5 years to address watershed restoration. The primary goal of restoration projects on US Forest Service land in the area, made possible by this funding, is to increase resilience to future flooding events. To achieve that goal, MTU partnered with the CGNF to create a new restoration project manager position based out of Red Lodge. This new position is also thanks to the largesse of a long-time MTU donor, who is generously funding the overhead costs of year one. Donors making gifts which allow MTU to leverage other resources has long been a strategy for our success; MTU is excited to introduce, Katie Young.

Katie, born and raised in Red Lodge, has been hired by MTU to develop and implement these projects in the Beartooth Basin. She earned a BA in Environmental Studies from the University of Montana in 2016. She then spent several years working in land conservation and restoration for nonprofit, private, and government organizations. She will be graduating from Western Colorado University in May with a master's degree in environmental management with an emphasis on watershed-scale restoration planning.

She is moving back to Red Lodge in early May to begin her work on the Stillwater River, Rock Creek, East and West Rosebud Creeks, Soda Butte Creek, and their tribu-

taries. Katie will be working in close partnership with the Custer Gallatin National Forest, Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, and local TU chapters including the Magic City Flyfishers and the Joe Brooks Chapter. The main focus of 2024 will be on assessing areas on the national forest that experienced the worst effects of the flood and identifying projects that have high potential to protect infrastructure from future flooding.

The 2022 flood, a 1,000-year event, is estimated to have caused \$38.5 million in damage to roadways, campsites, homes, and businesses. Restoration activities will largely focus on tactics that slow stream velocities during flooding events such as strategically placing large woody material in streams and building terraced buffers along riverbanks adjacent to roads. In short, re-creating healthy, functioning streams and floodplains.

Large woody material helps diffuse the power of floodwaters when appropriately placed far upstream from infrastructure. It diffuses the power of a flooding stream

so that it does less damage when it reaches towns. There are numerous additional benefits of large woody material projects to watershed health. The slowed flows increase water retention on the landscape, creating effective fuel breaks during wildfire events. Woody material also helps trap sediment which leads to clearer waters. Lastly, it increases the quality of trout habitat by creating deep pockets of water which help keep streams cold and clear.

As the saying goes, it takes a village to manage a watershed. It will take careful planning and collaboration to effectively address the current river restoration goals within the Red Lodge area. MTU is looking forward to joining community efforts and building new partnerships to conserve, protect, and restore cold water fisheries of the Beartooth Basin. And we are thrilled to have Katie extending our mission to this treasured portion of Montana.



The Stillwater River in south central Montana, just a few days before the 2022 flood reshaped the river channel.

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TIM AND JOANNE LINEHAN
Troy, MT

DAN AND KIM SHORT
Kalispell, MT

PHILANTHROPY SPOTLIGHT

How River Stewards Guide and Support MTU by Kelley Willett

For nearly two decades, a handful of committed Montana Trout Unlimited supporters have served as Stewardship Directors. The title 'Stewardship Director' was originally conceived of as a designation for individuals who are well-recognized in Montana's angling and coldwater conservation community. Their names in Trout Line have elevated MTU's profile across Montana and beyond. The people who took on this role for MTU come from a variety of backgrounds and all are committed to representing, promoting, and fostering MTU's mission.

This cohort's generosity and leadership has profoundly impacted the success of MTU—from the Monte Dolack license plate which has raised more than \$2.5 million for MTU operations, to several, current multi-year gift agreements from current Stewardship Directors that allow for MTU to plan, budget and execute work across the state year after year.

The word 'director' implies a fiduciary and/or operational responsibility that does not sync exactly with how this group supports MTU. So, to both honor the past and continue this important legacy, MTU is excited to announce that Stewardship Directors are being renamed River Stewards to better reflect their role as the curators of MTU's mission.

The River Stewards will continue to serve as mission ambassadors, increase visibility of MTU projects and campaigns, and contribute to the financial health of the organization. They are also a first call, when leadership wants advice and counsel on issues facing coldwater fisheries in MT. We also plan to add new members annually.

It is our pleasure to announce that



Do you have the original Monte Dolack-MTU license plate on your bumper?

stewardship

noun

stew·ard·ship 'stü-ërd·ship

: the conducting, supervising, or managing of something

especially : the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care

in 2024 two couples who have supported MTU for decades are joining the River Steward ranks: Tim and Joanne Linehan, of Troy Montana (and longtime owners of renowned Linehan Outfitting) and Dan and Kim Short, of Kalispell. Please look for full profiles of these dedicated volunteers in future Trout Lines.

There is a lot of bad news coming at us, and sometimes we forget that quietly, often with little or no fanfare, people in our community are doing good... doing great in fact, giving time, money, ideas and heart to ensure the MT rivers we love will be cold and fishy for generations to come. Thank you to the MTU River Stewards new and old for reminding us there is good news too.



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!

Chapter News

Bitterroot Chapter

Great news in the Bitterroot! After two years of effort to get permits in place, we completed the rebuild of the Job Corps boat ramp on the West Fork. The project was across the road from the Job Corps concrete training program. The Job Corps built a series of reinforced concrete planks that were linked together to form the ramp. The Darby Ranger District was also involved. It was great to finally complete this important public access improvement. Thank you to all who contributed to the project.

Big Blackfoot Chapter

BBCTU is preparing for a busy 2024 construction season. We have the project design and funding in place for completing Nevada Creek Phase 7. We also have habitat projects planned for Poorman Creek, Benedict Creek and Douglas Creek. Thanks to MTU for providing project design funding for Benedict Creek. BBCTU is collaborating with the Westslope TU Chapter on project funding, volunteer opportunities and outreach efforts across western Montana. Fish screen maintenance is a critical element of improving fish passage. BBCTU has helped install about 30 fish screens in the Blackfoot Watershed and we are working to hire a local contractor to maintain some of those screens. Thanks to Patrick Uthe (FWP Fisheries Biologist) for providing a "State of the Blackfoot Fishery" presentation at our April Board Meeting. Patrick has been a wonderful partner and his data helps us track biological outcomes for habitat projects.

Flathead Valley Chapter

This past winter the FVTU Board put quite a bit of time into reexamining our priorities and justifying who we are. With that, we launched a new theme for 2024. It captures what we believe, in only 5 words: "Bull Trout Belong in Montana!" We also developed several handouts that address some of the FAQs from our members and the general public. Native Trout are a unique and precious resource found in very few places in Montana, indeed even fewer on the planet. We have a duty as stewards and guardians of this resource in the Flathead Basin, to fight on behalf of Native Trout for those who follow.

George Grant Chapter

We want to thank any and all supporters that made the "Banquet of EPIC PROPORTIONS" one for the record books! Our chapter would not be able to accomplish what it does without the generous contributions of the communities that our Board represents. At the banquet our High School Senior Scholarship for \$2,500 was awarded to Lacey Pape. Congrats Lacey! Our chapter's Fifer Gulch Project in Anaconda is gaining ground every day and recently was awarded an incredible boost of funding from a National Wildlife Initiative.

Joe Brooks Chapter

The chapter has seen an uptick in efforts and energy upon completion of the first quarter of the year. With fresh leadership at the helm, there's a concerted effort to reinvigorate member engagement and deepen the chapter's connection to the Livingston community. As such a historic chapter, JBTU wants to reestablish itself as a leader in the conservation along the Yellowstone and its surrounding tributaries. The chapter held a strategic planning session on April 20 where new objectives and benchmarks were established for the future. We hope this serves as a catalyst, fostering community involvement, advancing coldwater conservation initiatives, exploring fundraising avenues, boosting membership, and expanding educational outreach. We are eager to embrace this new phase and remain committed to upholding the MTU mission.

Madison-Gallatin Chapter

MGTU is proud to help sponsor three upcoming events. First is the 13th Annual Kids Fishing Day on Saturday, May 18th at Glen Lake Rotary Park in Bozeman. Fishing starts at 10:00 AM and there will also be fun activities, goodie bags, lunch and prizes. Second, the Gallatin Watershed Spring Clean up, is also on Saturday May 18th. From 2-4 PM, volunteers will clean up 12 different sites across the Gallatin watershed, followed by a post-clean up celebration at Story Mill Park at 5 PM. Finally, our long-standing partnership with Grow Wild for the 16th Annual Gallatin River Weed Pull is on Saturday, June 8th 9-11 AM. This annual event is critical to keep the spread of noxious weeds at bay along the banks of the Gallatin. For more information on any of these events, see our socials and/or webpage - MGTU.org.

MONTANA TROUT UNLIMITED

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TROUT LINE SPRING 2023

UPCOMING EVENTS

www.montanatu.org

5/18/24 Gallatin Spring Clean Up and Kids Fishing Day
Bozeman, MT

5/18/24 Flathead Valley Chapter Banquet
Kallispell, MT

5/21/24 MTU Tip of the Hat
Craig, MT

6/8/24 Gallatin River Annual Weed Pull
Bozeman, MT

7/7/24 MTU Conservation Youth Camp
Georgetown Lake, MT

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

Please contact the Missoula office at 406-543-0054 or info@montanatu.org to get the word out through Montana TU.



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