



TROUT LINE

Newsletter from the Montana Council of Trout Unlimited



Contractors construct a new feeder channel for a grayling brood stock pond in the Centennial Valley.

SUMMER 2024



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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

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MONTANA TU STAFF

DAVID BROOKS
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
david@montanatu.org

MAGGIE ALTHAUS
OFFICE MANAGER & GIS TECHNICIAN
maggie@montanatu.org

CHRIS EDGINGTON
JEFFERSON WATERSHED PROJECT MANAGER
chris@montanatu.org

CLAYTON ELLIOTT
CONSERVATION & GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS DIRECTOR
clayton@montanatu.org

BILL PFEIFFER
OUTREACH COORDINATOR
bill@montanatu.org

KELLEY WILLETT
DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR
kelley@montanatu.org

KATIE YOUNG
BEARTOOTH PROJECT MANAGER
katie@montanatu.org

As a guide, I see lots of people who want to catch lots of trout, and those who want to catch A REALLY BIG trout. Most of us can relate. It's a hoot to bring beautiful rainbows and browns to the boat over and over, all day long. Just like it's a special thrill to strain against a rod bowed deeply by the power of mature fish in flight.

When the net reveals that we've caught a native trout, many of us feel an even deeper sense of satisfaction. I suspect that's because encountering a native trout reminds us of the eons of evolution that have taken place in the waters we fish today. Helping to conserve native fish is one way we might feel more connected to that arc of natural history, rather than just an observer of its tail end.

MTU's TroutLine often features our native trout work. (See Spring edition's article on helping bull trout in Swan Lake, for example). This edition is especially devoted to native trout efforts as a reminder of why they are important.

Besides pulling on the heartstrings, Montana's native fish, like the westslope and Yellowstone cutthroat, bull trout and Arctic grayling symbolize the heritage of this place as well as indigenous Montanans, who have known these fish for thousands of years. Native fish both signal and contribute to healthier aquatic ecosystems. Bull trout are an indicator of especially cold, clean, connected and complex waters; and as an apex predator, they also help manage and promote biodiversity. Native fish help contribute



MTU State Council Chair Brian Neilsen

directly to the state's estimated annual fishing economy of nearly \$1 billion. Even in the state's river systems where you can't legally target native fish, or where they have become scarce, their allure is part of the magic of the place and its wild trout fishery.

And, of course, most of us have to admit to having had a very slow fishing day saved by the tug of a native mountain whitefish. Native fish: sometimes we save them, sometimes they save us. Regardless of the species, experiencing native fish is important to people, the environment, the economy, and the mystique of Montana; MTU works to make that better.

Brian Neilsen
Chair

HELP PROTECT WILD TROUT

WATER TEMPERATURE IN °F

80° 70° 67° 65° 60° 55° 45°

80° - 69°
FISH FEEL THE HEAT
Find colder water

68° - 66°
STRESSED OUT TROUT
Keep fish in the water

65° - 55°
HAPPY TROUT
Fish responsibly

Always...
Wet hands before handling fish.
Minimize air exposure.
Use barbless hooks.

Always...
Allow fish to recover before release.
Carry a stream thermometer.
Use extreme caution with bull trout > 60°

MONTANA TROUT UNLIMITED
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Good riddance: Bad Actor, Philips Baker, exits Montana mining by David Brooks



Migratory bull trout depend on cold, clean water and gravels to spawn successfully.

In late May 2024, Phillips Baker Jr. abruptly retired from his position as the CEO, president and director of Hecla Mining Company. His departure is a victory for Montana’s environment. Hecla’s plans to mine silver and copper in the Cabinet Mountain Wilderness threaten the health of critical bull trout tributaries, which Baker has proved he can’t be trusted to safeguard.

Baker was at the head of the Pegasus Mining Company in 1998 when the bankruptcy he orchestrated left unreclaimed mining disasters at Zortman-Landusky, Beal Mountain and Basin Creek mines. In doing so, he stuck taxpayers—the state of Montana and federal land management agencies with tens of millions of dollars, and counting, of cleanup costs. These include treatment of toxically polluted water in places like the Fort Belknap Indian Community’s main coldwater stream. He walked away from the damage and debt with a “golden parachute” payout for his leadership.

Reacting to the Pegasus bankruptcy the Montana Legislature wisely amended the state’s Bad Actor law to prevent mining executives and companies from receiving a new permit to mine if they had left behind messes and unpaid cleanup bills until reclamation was complete and they reimbursed the state for all costs. MTU

and the conservation community strongly supported the Bad Actor law.

When Baker tried to return to Montana at the helm of Hecla, the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) filed a Bad Actor enforcement action against Hecla and Baker in March 2018. In 2021, after a change in administration, DEQ announced it was dropping the case. By doing so, DEQ walked away from its only real shot at defending Montanans from being bilked out of millions of dollars of taxpayer money by Baker. Thus, MTU along with NGO and Tribal partners filed suit in 2021 to compel DEQ to fulfill its legal duty to enforce the Bad Actor law. MTU followed with a Bad Actor suit directly against Baker and Hecla. That case was pending when Baker announced his retirement.

Like last time, Baker leaves MT taxpayers and the environment poorer, while he is personally wealthier than when he arrived. Records show that his retirement included roughly \$30M in Hecla stock as a send-off. While it’s worth celebrating the departure of a known despoiler of Montana lands, values and trout streams, the specter of a mine that risks dewatering and polluting pristine coldwater tributaries in the Cabinet Mountain Wilderness that are home to endangered bull trout remains.

So, we remain vigilant and will continue to join partners – Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, Fort Belknap Indian Community, Ksanka Elders Advisory Committee, Earthworks, Earthjustice, Montana Environmental Information Center, Clark Fork Coalition, Rock Creek Alliance, Montana Conservation Voters, and Cabinet Resources Group – to protect some of Montana’s most iconic species in this special place.



SUPPORT OUR WORK: DONATE



You may notice there is no remit envelope in this issue, a move we made intentionally to use less paper. Not to worry, we’ll include remits in some Trout Lines each year. We hope this quarter you might consider a gift online. Simply point your phone camera at this QR code or visit montanatu.org. Thank you!

Native fish conservation and restoration in SWMT by Chris Edgington

Remnants of the last Ice Age over 10,000 years ago, endemic Arctic grayling are Montana's most distinctive salmonid species with their unique sail-like dorsal fin and red, purple, and blue hues. Once widespread throughout the Upper Missouri River Basin (UMRB), grayling suffered dramatically from land use changes and habitat fragmentation brought by westward expansion in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The Arctic Grayling Workgroup was formed in 1987 to ward off the local extinction of this iconic species from Montana waters. Along with agency and NGO partners, MTU has provided critical advocacy for numerous efforts and approaches to conserve and restore Arctic grayling populations. Grayling proponents set the goal of ensuring the long-term, self-sustaining persistence of the species in the UMRB through developing, supporting, coordinating, and implementing conservation and restoration efforts. With the generous support of our donors, MTU has increased the scope and scale of these restoration efforts over the past few years.

Last year, we incorporated the long-standing non-profit, Arctic Grayling Recovery Program, into the suite of MTU's programs. We also signed a cooperative agreement with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to streamline the sharing of resources, expertise, and respon-



A beautiful native Arctic grayling. Richard Magjill photo

sibilities between our two organizations through 2030. These two agreements have increased our capacity and streamlined how we work for the benefit of grayling. Here are a few examples of these agreements put to work on the ground.

Last fall, we worked with FWP, the George Grant Chapter, and a private landowner to fund and replace an undersized culvert with a bridge to improve connectivity for grayling moving between the mainstem river and cooler tributaries in the Pintler Creek drainage.

This spring, MTU staff, and volunteers assisted in notching beaver dams on two critical grayling spawning tributaries in

the Upper Big Hole, Fishtrap and Steel Creek (see pg. 5). We provided comments and garnered support from partners for FWP's Environmental Assessment to do the same on Red Rock Creek in the Centennial Valley. Over the past several years, notching dams has restored access to miles of spawning habitat and increased the distribution and abundance of juvenile and adult grayling.

In June, in partnership with FWP, we completed a grayling genetic infusion project on private land in a tributary upstream of Upper Red Rock Lake (URRL). This project deepened an existing pond to increase the area of oxygenated water for overwinter survival. It transformed an irrigation drain ditch into high-quality spawning and rearing habitat up and downstream of the pond. This fall a broodstock of Red Rock-origin grayling will be established in the pond. We anticipate grayling will recruit to the Red Rock Lake population to reduce the chances of an irreversible genetic bottleneck in this distressed population. This project was a swift and strategic pivot after the US Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) pulled their Decision Notice for a project to improve overwinter habitat in URRL (the limiting factor for grayling survival in the lake) after a judge halted the project. We continue to press the Service to address the judge's concerns and develop a solution for URRL.

For the remainder of this summer, our Dillon-based Big Sky Watershed Coor-



A private land grayling broodstock pond project under construction earlier this summer near Upper Red Rock Lake.

dinator will be monitoring streamflows at six locations along the middle Big Hole around Dickie Bridge to help inform future projects that may provide more cold water for grayling and other trout species. Due to the successes of the more than 400 projects completed through the Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances program in the upper Big Hole, more adult grayling are using this reach to complete their life histories.

Grayling in the UMRB face numerous challenges. MTU will continue to collaborate with our state, federal, private, NGO, and chapter partners and build new partnerships whenever possible to continue efforts to expand the range of Montana Arctic grayling into currently unoccupied but suitable habitat in the Big Hole, Madison, Red Rock, Ruby river drainages.



Aerial view of our partner-led grayling broodstock project near Upper Red Rock Lake.

Notching Beaver Dams in the Big Hole



Montana FWP's Ryan Kreiner and Big Sky Watershed Corp member Jordan Hulla break a hole in a beaver dam on a tributary to the upper Big Hole River to aid spawning grayling.

Beginning in 2021, MT FWP and volunteers, including MTU, started notching beaver dams on important tributaries to the upper Big Hole River to help imperilled native Arctic grayling. Notching opens the dam slightly and allows the relatively small grayling to pass upstream and access spawning and rearing habitat. Between 2022 and 2023, 8 miles of new habitat became available on 6 streams after dams were notched. Four miles were directly attributed to notching, and 4 miles became accessible due to run off opening more areas. Increases in use by grayling were most notable in Steel and Fishtrap creeks.

In 2024, beaver dam surveys continued and fewer dams were encountered, none of which were complete barriers due to higher water conditions. Notching dams is a tricky business due to the timing of high water and the industrious beavers quickly rebuilding. However, most sites with large dams in 2021 and 2022 remained passable in 2024 due to the work over the past few years. We hope to continue to partner with MT FWP on these efforts each spring. It's hard but fulfilling work and should continue to boost spawning grayling numbers.

MONTANA COUNCIL OF TROUT UNLIMITED

OFFICERS

BRIAN NEILSEN, CHAIR
GREAT FALLS
mt_troutco@msn.com

LYLE COURTNAGE, VICE CHAIR
BILLINGS
lyle.courtamage@gmail.com

WILL TRIMBATH, TREASURER
HELENA
trimbath.will@gmail.com

MARK PETERSON, SECRETARY
BOZEMAN
markpeterson1939@gmail.com

SHARON SWEENEY FEE, NLC DIRECTOR
& PAST CHAIR
LIVINGSTON
ssfes123@yahoo.com

RIVER STEWARDS

DR. MARSHALL BLOOM
Hamilton, MT

MONTE DOLACK
Missoula, MT

PAUL MOSELEY
Missoula, MT

ROY O'CONNOR
Clinton, MT

DR. ROBERT RATCHESON
Hamilton, MT

PAUL STANLEY
Bozeman, MT/Piedmont, CA

DR. IRVING WEISSMAN
Hamilton, MT/Redwood City, CA

TIM AND JOANNE LINEHAN
Troy, MT

DAN AND KIM SHORT
Kalispell, MT



PHILANTHROPY SPOTLIGHT

Guides and outfitters chip in for Tip of the Hat by Kelley Willett



Since 2016, Tim Linehan and Brian Neilsen's brainchild, a little event called "Tip of the Hat," has raised nearly \$40,000, one tip at a time. Rather than strong arm guides and outfitters to donate an entire day, this event asks that guides donate only their tips, for one day. And hundreds of guides have done just that, recognizing

that conservation is important for their livelihoods. MTU is sure grateful to dedicated volunteers, Tim and Brian, and all the guides and outfitters. No one knows the rivers better, and we are honored to work with the fishing industry in Montana.



USBR grant helps fund Jefferson area projects by Chris Edgington

Watershed planning in the Jefferson River basin will have increased capacity thanks to the continued partnership between the Jefferson River Watershed Council (JRWC) and Montana Trout Unlimited (MTU). The United States Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) announced on July 2, 2024, that the partners received a \$300,000 funding commitment over three years through the USBR's Cooperative Watershed Management Program.

Funding will be used to:

1. Support MTU staff and the JRWC in completing a Watershed Restoration Plan (WRP) for the upper Jefferson River and key tributaries, highlighting stakeholder involvement, and project prioritization.

2. Contract technical assistance in identifying and developing low-tech, process-based restoration projects in discrete geographies that builds rangeland resiliency, increase groundwater storage, and buoy base-flow in key tributaries to the upper Jefferson River.

3. Utilize drone technology to complete a riparian habitat assessment. This data will inform project prioritization for the WRP with an emphasis on developing at least one water temperature improvement project.

This funding will usher in a new era of watershed planning in the Jefferson basin. It provides the JRWC and MTU the necessary capacity to complete a Watershed Restoration Plan and design water quantity, quality, and temperature projects at a critical time as impacts from prolonged drought continue to challenge wild trout survival. With trout numbers near, or at historic lows across much of southwest Montana, this is where we've been focusing our resources. We're pleased to have this support from the Bureau of Reclamation.



Chapter News

Bitterroot Chapter

BRTU successfully completed its fourth year of Trout in the Classroom. We have five high schools in the Valley and added a middle school this year. The teachers have learned a great deal, and every year gets a bit easier. We also are preparing for the Lee Metcalf restoration project to begin in September on Burnt Fork Creek. The project involves removing some 50-year old barrier to fish passage. A new culvert and bridge will be installed. In addition, a great deal of reed canary grass will be removed and cuttings of willows and cottonwoods will be planted. Two and a half miles of the Creek will be opened to fish passage, providing spawning areas as well as connecting the creek to the main stem of the river. The chapter will be collecting willow cuttings beginning in September to ready them for planting in October. This will be a major volunteer effort. A great deal of thanks goes to Christine Brissette, TU's project manager. We will announce the volunteer schedules in the upcoming chapter newsletters.

Missouri River Flyfishers Chapter

MRF has partnered with the Great Falls Chapter of Walleyes Unlimited, Sun River Watershed Group, Great Falls Parks & Recreation, and FWP for projects to improve Wadsworth Pond, a popular community pond outside Great Falls. Phase I of this project will include rock work to stabilize pond banks and improve the safety and ease of access to the water, in addition to adding a new permanent restroom. This project would not be possible without the unique partnerships involved, and MRF is proud to be a part of this work.

We're also excited to be the featured nonprofit at the first Cascade Farmers Market on August 2 at 5 pm at Wedsworth Hall in Cascade. The following day, we'll be participating in the Bashin' Trash Cleanup of the Missouri and Sun Rivers. MRF is also working with MTU to plan the next State Council Meeting in Great Falls on September 21. MRF is a sponsor of the Montana Watershed Coordination Council's Watershed Tour this September 18-20. This tour will feature natural resource issues, projects, and partnerships across the Sun River Watershed. MRF and MTU have helped fund several projects that will be featured on this tour. Tickets are available now at [www.mtwatersheds.org/connection/watershed-](http://www.mtwatersheds.org/connection/watershed-tour/)

tour/. MRF will resume regular board meetings in late September. The annual Winter RiverFest will be held February 15, 2025 at the Great Falls airport.

Madison-Gallatin Chapter

The chapter is getting ready for the annual Lower Madison River Clean Up, taking place Saturday, Aug. 24. We are looking forward to sprucing up our beloved Lower and Middle Madison 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 at 12:00 pm where we will have free sack lunches and beverages. Participants can also see if they won a prize with their raffle tickets! To RSVP to this event please contact: lynae@damsselflyfishing.com.

Westslope Chapter

WSCTU had its Trout in the Classroom release event with Bonner and Clinton schools at the end of May. The students love finally releasing the rainbow trout they've watched hatch from eyed-up eggs! The teachers also like that the hands-on approach ties in with the local watershed and what trout need to survive. Thanks to teachers, Sean Kiffe and Ciara Lapke for a successful program! The chapter was also thrilled to co-host a Free Youth Fly Fishing Education Day with the Lolo Watershed Group. The event took place at Travelers' Rest State Park on July 12th. We had a great group of kids ages 7 and up and volunteers. Kids learned about trout species ID, stream ecology, fly tying, fly casting, and more. We really enjoyed this event and look forward to more in the future. We are still on hiatus for chapter meetings, but will be starting up again later this fall. Stay tuned for or winter programming and remember to fish responsibly.



MONTANA TROUT UNLIMITED

CHAPTERS & PRESIDENTS

BITTERROOT CHAPTER #080

David Ward, Hamilton
dward0451@gmail.com
www.bitterroottu.org

BIG BLACKFOOT CHAPTER #544

Jim Stutzman, Missoula
stutz292@hotmail.com
www.bbctu.org

FLATHEAD VALLEY CHAPTER #085

Wade Fredenburg, Kalispell
gocatswf1956@gmail.com
www.flatheadtu.org

GEORGE GRANT CHAPTER #183

Forrest Jay, Anaconda
president@ggtu.org
www.georgegranttu.org

JOE BROOKS CHAPTER #025

Gardner Imhoff, Livingston
gardner.imhoff25@gmail.com

KOOTENAI VALLEY CHAPTER #683

Alan Gerstnecker, Libby
libbymt406.tuh@gmail.com

CHUCK ROBBINS CHAPTER #656

Mike Geary, Twin Bridges
hwldgmt@gmail.com

MADISON-GALLATIN CHAPTER #024

Sarah Clark, Bozeman
mgttroutunlimited@gmail.com
www.mgtu.org

MAGIC CITY FLY FISHERS #582

Lyle Courtnage, Billings
lyle.courtnage@gmail.com
www.mcfonline.org

MISSOURI RIVER FLYFISHERS #406

Tracy Wendt, Great Falls
flyfishersmissouririver@gmail.com
www.missouririverflyfishers.org

PAT BARNES-MISSOURI RIVER CHAPTER #055

Tom Caffrey, Helena
patbarnestu@gmail.com

SNOWY MOUNTAIN CHAPTER #610

Mike Chapman, Lewistown
bmchap@midrivers.com
www.snowymountaintu.org

WESTSLOPE CHAPTER #056

Brandon Dwyer, Missoula
westslopechaptertu@gmail.com
www.westslope-trout.org



Montana Council of Trout Unlimited
PO BOX 7186 MISSOULA, MT 59807

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
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MISSOULA, MT
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TROUT LINE SUMMER 2024

UPCOMING EVENTS

www.montanatu.org

8/10/24 Bitterroot Kids Fly Fishing Clinic
Stevensville, MT

8/24/24 Annual Lower Madison River Clean Up
Norris, MT

9/21/24 MTU State Council Meeting
Great Falls, MT

WANT 4,000 MONTANA TU MEMBERS TO HEAR ABOUT YOUR EVENT?

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



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