



TROUT LINE

Newsletter from the Montana Council of Trout Unlimited



An MTU youth camper dangles a dry fly for native Westslope cutthroat high in the Sapphire Mountains.

FALL 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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FROM THE CHAIR: Brian Neilsen

For the past four years, I've had the pleasure of serving as the Chair of the Montana State Council of Trout Unlimited. When I first accepted this position, I couldn't help but feel humbled to step into the shoes of so many great volunteer leaders leading the charge for clean water and wild fish over the past 60 years. From the early battles to keep some of our best rivers free-flowing, to the fight for public stream access, to restoring streams battered by extraction, MTU has been on the front lines for six decades.

A common theme in our work during all of that time, and in this issue of Trout Line, is collaboration. We are strongest when we work together to save wild trout and the beautiful places they reside. However, it is always important to recognize those whose dedication, commitment and effort go above and beyond. For this reason the Montana State Council created the Chair's Awards.

The Chair's Outstanding Volunteer Award honors an exceptional volunteer who has significantly advanced MTU's mission - someone who has shown remarkable dedication through their involvement in conservation, educational, or advocacy projects, and through countless hours of volunteer work and miles traveled. The 2024 award goes to Tom Caffery, President of the Pat Barnes Chapter. Under Tom's stewardship, PBTU revitalized the board of directors and held one of the most successful banquets in chapter history. In addition to being an outfitter, award-winning high school science teacher, and opening a fishing lodge on the Missouri, Tom still dedicated time to diligently lead the chapter for the last three years, rekindling the Trout in the Classroom program and spearheading



MTU State Council Chair Brian Neilsen

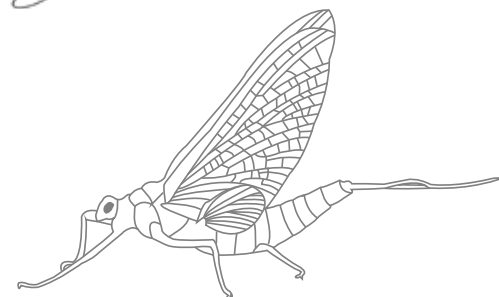
restoration projects.

The Chair's Outstanding Chapter Award seeks to honor a chapter that has made significant strides in advancing on-the-ground projects, engaging volunteers, providing educational opportunities, implementing strategic outreach and advocacy efforts, and championing conservation initiatives that reflect our mission. We present the 2024 award to the Madison-Gallatin Chapter for their exceptional dedication to innovative outreach, impactful volunteer efforts, and meaningful contributions to conservation projects. This award honors their outstanding commitment to protecting Montana's coldwater fisheries and watersheds.

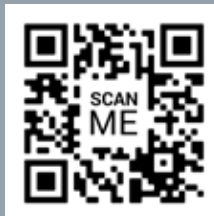
While we celebrate these unique achievements, there are hundreds of MTU volunteers and donors who carry the torch for wild trout conservation. With so many making selfless contributions to this vital cause, it is nearly impossible to honor everyone with the accolades they deserve. To all those doing this important work, we salute you and send our deep gratitude.

Brian Neilsen

Chair



SUPPORT OUR WORK: DONATE



Whether you prefer to donate online or through the included remit envelope, we appreciate your support of our vital mission: to conserve, protect, and restore Montana's coldwater fisheries and their watersheds.

Volunteers and Partnerships Drive MTU Youth Education by Bill Pfeiffer



MTU Conservation Youth Camp attendees constructing beaver dam analogues on Smart Creek, BHD National Forest

Over the past two decades, hundreds of young anglers have passed through the ranks of MTU's Conservation Youth Camp, a five-day event held each July on beautiful Georgetown Lake. This popular program provides an immersive and inclusive learning environment for 11- to 14 year-olds from around Montana and the country. With a focus on ecology, conservation, outdoor career paths, and sound angling ethics, MTU staff and stalwart volunteers strive to create the next generation of wild and native fish advocates, as well as skilled and fun-loving fly fishers.

Our 2024 camp was a smashing success, bringing together participants from two states and 11 different cities and towns, including a strong group of female anglers and many attendees receiving scholarship assistance. Our 22 volunteers also came from far and wide, and ensured kids got the focused instruction that makes for the best individualized learning. Volunteers from Montana and Idaho represented 6 different TU chapters.

From contributing to an active beaver dam restoration project, to touring a fish hatchery and learning about wild trout management from Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks biologists, Youth Camp wraps fishing into the specifics of good coldwater conservation.

While an overnight multi-day experience is ideal for some, it may not be accessible for all kids or parents. So we asked ourselves, "How can we use the existing curriculum in new ways to reach more young people?" Like so much of our work, partnership and collaboration provided the answers.

During the height of the pandemic, overnight camps weren't a safe option, so we created one-day workshops. They were so popular we extended the program indefinitely. Sessions begin with a short presentation of the 4 C's of trout habitat (clean, cold, complex, and connected waters), fish identification, and safe handling practices before a rod is ever rigged. Kids learn about the components of a fly fishing setup, including how to care for and assemble their equipment. After this foundation is laid, we move on to casting practice, and after lunch, students enjoy fishing with one-on-one instruction from volunteers. The day ends with trivia and prizes to test what students learned.

Like so much of our work, none of this would be possible without collaboration. This August, MTU partnered with Crosscut in Bozeman to provide a one-day clinic for 10 campers at their Lightning Creek facility, located high in the Gallatin range. Campers and counselors alike were thrilled as native westslope cutthroat eagerly inhaled our

dry flies when storm clouds parted in the afternoon. We offered a similar program for students in the Bitterroot Buggers program, developed by our Bitterroot Chapter. In all, more than 30 Montana kids benefitted from our one-day clinics this year. We hope to continue these partnerships in 2025.

One day is great and five days is better, but can you provide beneficial conservation education in the span of just 15 minutes? Our experience attending Boulder Kids River Day for the past two years would indicate the answer is a resounding YES. Organized by the Jefferson Conservation District, this event brings together educators from government agencies and conservation organizations with school students from across the watershed. Each class moves through a series of stations to learn about conservation and resource management. Our 15-minute Four C's of Trout Habitat Lightning Talk introduces the essential elements necessary for healthy wild trout – and how that drives TU's mission – to over 200 students. Even a few moments with a young person can plant the seed for a lifetime of conservation passion, and some of these students may even enjoy our next summer camp after being introduced to TU's work in their home waters.

MTU youth programs have always specialized in offering a unique type of fly fishing instruction by directly connecting conservation and ecology to sound angling skills and a more holistic experience. By seeking new ways and opportunities to share our vision and knowledge of conservation-minded angling, we're helping to train the next generation of trout advocates. In the coming years, we will collaborate with more organizations to ensure that more kids understand the importance of keeping their local streams clean, cold, complex, and connected. But none of this important work would be possible without dedicated volunteers. Thank you for taking a kid fishing!



Getting Bullish on Bull Trout by David Brooks

When it comes to iconic creatures and mating season, bull trout define fall in Montana. Just as the ascending bugles of bull elk signal September, bull trout begin to swim quietly toward their cold, clean natal streams to spawn.

In the world of Montana fisheries, bull trout are the apex predator. Yet they are extremely sensitive within the aquatic environment, depending on pristine water quality and water temperatures that stay below 60 degrees. Because of this dependency on exceptional habitat, their numbers have decreased by more than 50% in Montana from historic levels, which landed bull trout on the threatened status list under the Endangered Species Act. There are precious few places where anglers can legally target bull trout in the state due to those losses and listing. In an effort to protect the places where these majestic fish remain, and to restore them to where they have been lost, MTU and our partners are focusing our efforts in several ways.



A bucket of juvenile and resident bull trout waiting for DNA sampling before release.

Last spring, we reported that our advocacy efforts and support had helped lead to MT Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) releasing and approving separate (but aligned) plans to restart lake trout suppression in Swan Lake to help recover bull trout in that system. This summer, FWP and FWS conducted extensive gillnetting of lake trout to test the best protocols, times of day, net sizes and locations to achieve the most effective removal of lake



Bull trout rely on pristine cold water and clean gravels to reproduce. The upper Fish Creek Drainage.

trout with the least bull trout bycatch in preparation for those agency plans being fully implemented in summer 2025. Through a multi-year agreement with the MT Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, MTU provided funding for new and repaired nets.

This work at Swan Lake is critical for bull trout. Nearly a decade of previous research proves that the illegal introduction and expansion of nonnative lake trout in Swan Lake is THE limiting factor driving bull trout numbers to historic lows in this system. That research also shows that aggressive gillnetting of lake trout can help stabilize and, hopefully, rebound this bull trout population. The preliminary efforts this summer reveal the same. Working for only two weeks in July and only netting on half the lake, agency staff and contractors removed more than 1,200 large lake trout, which equated to 1.7 kilograms of fish per hectare. That is just shy of the 2.0kg/ha goal, which has been estimated to help stabilize and recover bull trout. We will continue to help fund this effort, as well as look to our staff and volunteers to take part in the full-scale gillnetting efforts beginning next summer.

Another way we are committing to bull trout is through MTU's participation in a coalition of federal and state agencies aiming to collectively evaluate and champion the best possible solutions for the highest priority bull trout populations and bull

trout areas of concern. MTU's participation in this group is directed at having broad stakeholder buy-in for large-scale bull trout recovery projects, like Swan Lake, that will enhance partners' ability to generate public support, agency approval and funding for such projects.

We are also engaged in localized efforts to care for bull trout. On the project front, Christine Brissett, Trout Unlimited's Bitterroot Project Manager, is spearheading multiple efforts, along with the Bitterroot TU chapter. Christine has started and continues to grow a Bitterroot fish screen program. Installing fish screens on private irrigation ditches with a high risk of entraining bull trout is also helping to save wild trout throughout the watershed. In the next two years, Christine will manage a pair of culvert upgrades within the Lost Horse drainage that will reduce sediment loads and improve fish passage, both of which benefit bullies.

Bull trout need our help in the halls of advocacy and policy, too. As we have reported on over the years, MTU has strongly supported MT Department of Environmental Quality's setting of a site specific selenium standard for Lake Koocanusa and the Kootenai River. Selenium flowing downstream from coal mines in British Columbia and entering Montana waters continues to increase in water and fish samples, including in bull trout in the Kootenai system. Once selenium reaches

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Project on Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge Restores Habitat by MTU Staff



Timberland Excavation building a new streambank with wood and brush in early October.

It was slated to be the hottest weekend of the year. Stevensville hit 103 degrees by the afternoon. But, that didn't stop a group of nine volunteers from Jackson Contractor Group from showing up to Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge on a Saturday. To beat the heat, they started before the sun rose above the Sapphires by dismantling a popular shade structure that sat within the construction footprint of an upcoming fish passage project, and storing it so it could be rebuilt post-construction.

This was no average group of volunteers. When Jackson Contractor Group contributes, as they have on many Trout Unlimited projects, they always bring equipment, efficiency and a plan. The team was prepared to be there all day, but with a little ingenuity, hydraulics, good rigging and luck, the job was done before lunch and the crew shifted to an afternoon of bass fishing in the heat.

This work day was the start of an exciting project to restore fish passage in North Burnt Fork Creek, a major tributary to the Bitterroot River, within Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge. A water control structure sitting just above the creek's confluence has effectively blocked migratory fish from accessing the Burnt Fork for over 50 years. With the structure gone, and a new, 32-foot culvert installed, 2.5 miles of habitat will be opened to spawning fish.

The project also highlights the value of community collaboration. As TU National has led the major infrastructure and con-

struction work, the Bitterroot Chapter of TU (BRTU) has been busy filling October with community and educational events. A crew from Trapper Creek Job Corps collected willow cuttings and soon will erect fences and kick off tree planting. The chapter has helped orchestrate middle and high school classes from Corvallis, Stevensville and Hamilton to help plant willows and riparian plants. Community members will also be invited to join in two future planting events.

"Our chapter is honored to collaborate on this important project," said Dave Ward, BRTU President. "We've brought several of our local partners and student groups in



BRTU volunteers collecting willows for revegetation post construction.

to help on the ground. This opportunity to reconnect the Burnt Fork will benefit wild fish and other wildlife for years to come."

In its infancy, the project was supported by two MTU mini-grants and the Westslope Chapter of TU which helped launch initial design work. Bitterroot TU also received a prestigious nation-wide Embrace-a-Stream grant from TU to help cover the cost of revegetation, which will ultimately enhance 1/2-mile of streamside habitat.

Like many restoration projects, this effort will support more than just fish. Set within the popular Wildlife Viewing Area of the Refuge, enhancing migratory bird habitat and public access were also high priorities. Revegetation will replace reed canary grass, an aggressive, non-native species, with native trees and shrubs. This riparian transformation will create shade for fish, cover, nesting habitat and foraging opportunities for migratory songbirds.

Following the installation of the new culvert structure, the ADA-accessible trail will be repaved, and new interpretive signs will be installed. TU project manager Christine Brissette noted, "I really enjoy using our projects to do more than help fish. Designing projects for many species, finding meaningful ways to engage the community, and finding local contractors and suppliers to keep 'fish' money in the local economy. That's what keeps these projects interesting year after year and builds new connections and support in the community."

Project work is currently underway and is set to be complete by the time of publication. For more info, contact Christine Brissette or Dave Ward at dward0451@gmail.com.



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2024 MONTANA COUNCIL CHAIR AWARDS



Tom McCaffery (L) accepting the Outstanding Volunteer Award from Chair Brian Neilsen.



Members of MGTO Outstanding Volunteer Award from Chair Brian Neilsen.

The 2024 MTU State Council Chair Awards ceremony took place at the September 21 meeting in Great Falls. Pat Barnes Chapter President Tom Caffery received the Chair's Outstanding Volunteer Award for his dedication to the chapter over the past several years. The Madison-Gallatin Chapter received the Chair's Outstanding Chapter Award in recognition of innovative outreach, impactful volunteer work and significant contributions to conservation projects in SW MT. Congratulations to this year's recipients.

Bull Trout cont. from pg. 4

a tipping point in many aquatic species, especially fish, it can completely disrupt reproduction and egg development, wiping out entire age classes. Now that there is a protective standard for this toxin, Montana is part of an International Joint Commission, which is evaluating the science and possible transboundary solutions. Pressuring Canada to enforce water quality standards on the global mining company Glencore, which recently acquired the BC mining operation for nearly \$7 billion, will be a long process. Given that some of the northern Rockies most precious bull trout waters are on the receiving end of this mining waste, we will continue to push for protections that prevent the crash of Montana's northwestern fisheries.

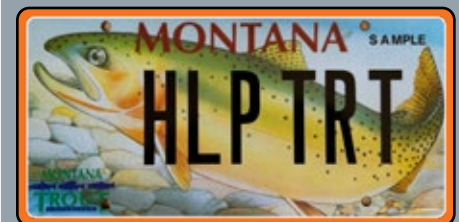
Similarly, we continue to join the Bitterroot chapter of TU and other partners in watchdogging the threat of a rare earth element mine in the Sheep Creek tributary of the upper West Fork of the Bitterroot. This critical bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout spawning tributary is no place for

developing an unproven mineral resource that would entail severe water quantity and quality impacts on aquatic life, downstream water users, wildlife and recreation.

In the last year, the Flathead Valley chapter of TU has adopted the tagline, "Bull Trout Belong in Montana." We totally agree, and these highlights are just some of the ways we are investing in this Montana trout treasure.



SUPPORT OUR WORK



Ask for the original Montana Council of Trout Unlimited Plate when you purchase a new vehicle or renew your registration.

Chapter News

Big Blackfoot Chapter

Throughout this quarter, restoration and construction projects have progressed along the length of the watershed. First, Poorman Creek is long term restoration project of multiple agencies (USFS, USFWS, BLM and Lewis and Clark County), and is the highest ranked tributary in the upper Blackfoot River for Westslope Cutthroat and Bull Trout. The project replaced an undersized culvert with a bridge to enhance connectivity for native trout. Along the middle reaches of the Blackfoot, work on Nevada Creek continues with Phase 7, which includes restoring two miles of the stream and upgrading two irrigation diversion to provide fish passage. This will include implementing grazing management systems which will enhance riparian habitat, reduce sediments and improve water management efficiency. In the lower watershed, a new fish screen on Benedict Creek was installed in late September. Thanks to MTU for the Mini-Grant that helped fund the design. USFS, USFWS and MFWP Future Fisheries provided additional funding for the project. We are also working on a road decommissioning project with the Lolo NF that will remove a number of undersized culverts and permanently remove about 27 miles of roads that negatively impacted riparian areas and added to the sediment transfer in key spawning tributaries.

Joe Brooks Chapter

As of January 2024, the chapter has a mostly new board of directors. We're looking to build upon the great work of past boards and volunteers, and get momentum back after COVID. The Chapter conducted a strategic planning session in April 2024, with attendance from many community and chapter members. Based on that planning we are initially focusing on outreach and communication to chapter membership and community partners, identifying conservation priorities and future projects, and shoring up our sustainability through budgeting, fundraising, and events. We have a new chapter logo and a new website, jbtu.org. In other news, we supported Montana Freshwater Partners in their Yellowstone River Clean Up. Almost 100 volunteers participated in the river clean up and we collected a total of 2,240 lbs of trash. Check our website for upcoming chapter meetings in Livingston.

Missouri River Fly Fishers

MRF's biggest news for this fall is the Wadsworth Fishing Pond Project set to begin construction. All permits are in order and final contracts are being signed. This is an FWP Community Ponds project, funded in part by MTU, MRF, and in partnership with Walleyes Unlimited. Sun River Watershed Group is managing the project and acquired funding for shoreline revetment. Other partners include the City of Great Falls Parks and Recreation. This is only Phase 1 of a multiphase project. This month we will be reconvening our board and holding officer elections. Our Winter Riverfest fundraiser and auction is set for Feb. 15, 2025 with musical guest Tom Catmull. We hope to see you there.

Snowy Mountain Chapter

On May 16, 2024, the Snowy Mountain Chapter of Montana TU held its annual meeting. A new slate of officers were elected with Anna Schale, Secretary, Brett Shelagowski, Treasurer, Sean Strohm, Vice President, and Beckie Williams serving as President. The past few months the new officers have been brainstorming ideas to garner community involvement and increase our local membership. Stay tuned for more information on scheduled activities. In August in conjunction with MTFWP, ten members of the Chapter helped remove old fencing and debris from the Hruska Fishing Access Site. We estimate that this amounted to 50 volunteer hours and a dump trailer full of wire fencing, barbed wire, and old posts. It was an impressive project and the Chapter is proud of cleaning up this site after years of neglect. We are also closely monitoring the City of Lewistown city waste treatment plant problems which has caused the release of sewage into the Big Spring Creek watershed. The State of Montana DEQ is involved, and the Chapter will keep an eye on any progress, or lack of progress, being made.



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TROUT LINE FALL 2024

UPCOMING EVENTS

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- 12/13/24** Winter State Council Meeting
Remote, Online
- 12/19/24** Flathead Valley TU Christmas Party
Kalispell, MT
- 2/15/25** MRF Winter Riverfest
Great Falls, MT
- 3/01/25** Madison-Gallatin Chapter Fundraiser
Bozeman, MT
- 3/07/25** George Grant Chapter Banquet
Butte, MT
- 3/08/25** Spring State Council Meeting
Helena, MT

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