

Plugging People In To the Outdoors

Montana Wild—FWP's new education and conservation center—is helping kids, adults, and families connect with the natural world.

BY TOM DICKSON

TWILIGHT FLIGHT Kids and adults watch little brown myotis and other bat species swoop overhead during an evening seminar at Montana Wild. The new conservation and education complex, built on the capital city's outskirts, aims to provide opportunities for people to learn about nature and build outdoors skills. The ultimate goal? Promote stewardship of Montana's wildlife and wild places. Right: A demonstration raptor holds the attention of a young visitor.

JESSE LEE VARNADO

On a midsummer afternoon, bikes lean against the Montana Wild education center, while inside a dozen kids listen intently as Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks wildlife specialist Tamie Laverdure talks about potential dangers posed by grizzly and black bears. It's summer school, with a wild twist.

As part of her introduction to bear biology, Laverdure holds up skulls of the two species to show the difference in size, and the kids marvel at the big teeth and wide jaws. Then the class heads outside.

There, Laverdure has set up hands-on stations for learning how to recognize bear sign, use bear pepper spray, and hang food high from a tree. One demonstration campsite, litter free with food safely stored in bear-proof containers, shows how not to attract bears. Another is a bear magnet, and the kids know it.

Laverdure asks what they see that would attract black bears and grizzlies. "Toothpaste in the tent." "Frying pan left out with grease in it." "The cooler is wide open." Laverdure points out that bears can be dangerous—even deadly—but encounters can be greatly reduced if people store food properly and understand basic bear behavior.

These kids are realizing they can safely recreate in bear country. By taking a few sensible safety precautions and paying attention to the surroundings, they and their families can relax and enjoy the outdoors.

Montana Wild was created in part to help alleviate apprehension about the outdoors—as well as to build outdoors skills, assist teachers, and advocate for conservation. Joe Maurier, FWP director, says the new center's ultimate goal is to promote stewardship

of the land, water, and wildlife that support hunting, fishing, camping, hiking, and other outdoors recreation. "Sustaining natural resources requires people who care about the outdoors," he says. "But that can only come from having a connection with the natural world. Montana Wild is a place that will help people make that connection, where they can learn about the outdoors so they can get out there and experience it for themselves."

The Montana Wild education center occupies a refurbished historic limestone block building, originally built in 1892 (see sidebar, page 31), that overlooks scenic Spring Meadow Lake State Park. Next door is the wildlife center, where a coordinator and volunteers care for injured and orphaned



KENTON ROWE

raptors, bears, and other wildlife before release back into the wild. The Montana Wild complex also includes a disabled-accessible fishing dock, shallow waters where kids can look for water bugs and minnows, and a 25-yard archery range.

Funding to acquire and refurbish the complex came from state and federal grants, insurance reimbursements, some fishing and hunting license revenue, and, perhaps



LEARNING CENTER Central to the Montana Wild complex is the education center (above), housed in a restored historic foundry. Inside is a reception area (left), meeting rooms, and an auditorium containing a “living stream” with live fish. Displays and interactive features now under construction will showcase Montana’s landscapes and conservation traditions. Another feature is the science laboratory (right), where kids can examine water plants and insects. The laboratory is one of many ways Montana Wild works with teachers to promote Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education.



most important, the Helena-based Foundation for Animals (formerly the Mikal Kellner Foundation). For two decades the nonprofit has worked with FWP to create a state-of-the-art center for wildlife and education.

The 7,000-square-foot center houses public meeting areas, a science laboratory, and a central auditorium containing a “living stream” exhibit with live trout, longnose suckers, sticklebacks, and other species. By late summer 2012, the hall will brim with interactive exhibits that celebrate Montana’s wildlife and explain how the state’s many abundant populations came about. “Visitors will come here and get a sense of the mystique of bears, elk, mule deer, bull trout, sauger, and other wildlife,” says Thomas Baumeister, assistant chief of FWP’s Communication and Education Bureau. “At the

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

same time, they will actively learn about what it takes for wildlife to live and survive on the landscape—and why individual Montanans have stepped up to help conserve those resources. It’s the story of what we have in Montana and how we got here.”

Opportunities to connect

On a March evening, three experienced hunters are waiting inside the center to see if anyone will show up for Montana Wild’s first outdoors recreation seminar: “An Introduction to Hunting Wild Turkeys.” Shortly before the scheduled start, all chairs are still empty, and the presenters joke nervously that they may end up going home early. But within minutes dozens of people are streaming into the room, and it soon fills to capacity. After the one-hour presentation on hunting equipment and strategies, audience members crowd around the experts asking questions.

Afterward Baumeister, one of the presenters, is clearly pleased. “Honestly, we had no idea if even one person would show,” he says. “Seeing a turnout like this is great. It’s exactly what we hope will happen again and again.”

So far, it has. Seminars on bighorn sheep, turtles, bears, bats, amphibians, and northern goshawks this past summer attracted hundreds of people who previously had no way to directly learn from and interact with biologists and other experts. “We wanted the center to provide opportunities for people to connect with nature through a greater understanding of the outdoors,” says Baumeister, “and it’s working.”

Baumeister, Maurier, and others are counting on those connections to ignite, in time, a stewardship ethic that perpetuates Montana’s tradition of conservation. Here’s why:

Throughout the 20th century, Montana and other states were kept busy restoring

fish and wildlife populations depleted by overharvest and habitat destruction from a previous era. “Today many populations are recovered,” says Baumeister, “and one of the biggest challenges we now face is maintaining public participation in hunting, birding, camping, and other outdoors recreation.”

Participation, says Maurier, is a step toward stewardship. “Over Montana’s history, the people who decide to help conserve wildlife and habitat are the people who value the outdoors,” he explains. “If you don’t have that public support and involvement, conservation doesn’t work. But that involvement comes only when people actually go outdoors and experience it firsthand. That’s really the main purpose of Montana Wild.”

To nudge people outside, the center offers classes on outdoors skills. FWP staff and volunteer instructors teach hunter and bowhunter education, Becoming an Outdoors-Woman courses, and boat and water safety. Visitors can also learn how to fly-fish, train a hunting dog, survive overnight in the woods, and more.

Also offered are instruction and training on how people can coexist with wildlife. Montana Wild provides displays, brochures, and seminars that give campers, hikers, and homeowners practical solutions for keeping raccoons out of garbage and bear-proofing their backyard.

“We also want to help people overcome their apprehension of wildlife and wild places,” says Laurie Evarts, education center program manager. She notes that as Montana becomes more urbanized, and kids and their parents spend more time indoors watching TV or playing video games, the outdoors can seem like a scary place. “People can’t connect with the natural world if they don’t feel safe leaving the house,” she says.

Value-added education

Montana Wild is also connecting people to the outdoors by incorporating natural history and wildlife science into the state’s existing education programs. Kristen Grue is a Helena-based high school science teacher with Access to Success, a diploma-completion program for students at risk of dropping out of high school. This past spring she met with Evarts to set up a project. Access to Success students learned about birds from a vol-



INTRODUCTION, EXPLORATION, RECREATION Students visiting Montana Wild learn about native species such as paddlefish (held here by Aquatic Education Program coordinator Dave Hagengruber). Afterward, they are urged to explore exhibits such as the living stream (top) or shallow water areas outside and begin solving simple scientific problems. Education and skills building, such as angling classes at the nearby fishing dock (below), inspire young people to continue exploring the outdoors on their own.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: KENTON ROWE; FWP; LUJIE DURAN/FWP

TOP TO BOTTOM: KENTON ROWE; JESSE LEE VARNADO; JESSE LEE VARNADO



BUILDING SKILLS Montana Wild provides opportunities for learning skills such as shooting a bow and arrow (above, in the new archery center). FWP and volunteer instructors also teach participants how to set up a tent, paddle a kayak, call in a wild turkey, operate a boat safely, and handle a firearm. The Becoming an Outdoors-Woman Program will use the center for classes on fly-tying (right), outdoor cooking, fly-casting, and more. Hunter education classes (below) will also take place at the center and surrounding grounds.



unteer Helena birder, then figured out where to place bird houses around Spring Meadow Lake State Park to benefit various species. “They loved the project and learned a ton about birds,” Grue says. One student later gave a talk on birds and bird houses to a class of middle-schoolers, who then monitored the boxes to see if birds were nesting.

In addition to running Hooked on Fishing, Archery in the Schools, and other youth programs, Montana Wild staff work closely with teachers, school boards, and the state Office of Public Instruction on promoting Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) standards. For instance, students visiting the wildlife center will soon be learning about the science that wildlife biologists use to monitor grizzly bear populations. Students will also find out about science-based professions, such as fisheries biologists who use satellite technology to track trout, or wildlife researchers who study DNA to identify wild animals.

Evarts emphasizes the center “isn’t a Friday afternoon entertainment spot” but a place for students to learn and become engaged. “We want to add value to what teachers are already doing and help them meet their educational objectives,” she says.

To make Montana Wild accessible to students statewide, the 2011 legislature appropriated \$25,000 per year, likely to be awarded as grants, for bus travel from schools to the education center. To give wildlife education a boost elsewhere in the state, Evarts has begun teaching educators how to take kids safely outdoors and incorporate the natural world into math and science lessons.

Ranchers and raptors

Another way people connect with wildlife is by caring about animals in need. That was the case with Jeff Schile, who in March discovered an ailing golden eagle at his family’s Lost Lake Ranch near Fort Benton. The raptor was transported to Montana Wild’s wildlife center, where its blood was found to contain highly toxic levels of lead, likely from bullet fragments in deer gut piles the raptor had eaten. Lisa Rhodin, a raptor expert and the wildlife center coordinator, says the emaciated, nearly paralyzed eagle was treated with detoxifying drugs by volunteer veterinarians from Apex Animal Hospital in



UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL A visitor eyes the large teeth on a grizzly bear mount at the education center. “We want Montana Wild to get kids excited about wildlife so they begin to explore—safely, of course—this state’s amazing outdoors,” says FWP director Joe Maurier

A REMARKABLE TRANSFORMATION

Not long ago, the place where today families learn Montana’s conservation story and students become inspired about science was a toxic dump.

The Montana Wild complex sits on the site of the Stedman Foundry and Machine Company, founded in 1892 and closed two decades later. In 2001, a chemistry student at nearby Carroll College discovered contaminated soil at adjacent Spring Meadow Lake State Park. State and federal scientists determined that 12 acres of the park and the future home of the Montana Wild complex was contaminated with arsenic, lead, and mine waste dating back to hard rock milling operations a century earlier. Groundwater also was contaminated with toxins. Because the contaminants extended nearly a mile north of the original rock mill, scientists suspect that the gravel mining operation that created Spring Meadow Lake in the 1930s had spread the contaminants.

To clean up the site for public use, the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) oversaw removing, at a cost of \$2.4 million, 34,000 cubic yards of soil, which was trucked to landfills. DEQ then re-contoured and seeded the dump site, which today is no longer visible under native grasses and woody shrubs. The soil remediation project delayed by a year the completion of Montana Wild’s education center, housed in one of the foundry’s refurbished original stone buildings.

“It’s a fascinating story,” says Thomas Baumeister, assistant chief of the FWP Communication and Education Bureau. “The site was first transformed into a place for some industries that helped Helena grow. Then it sat vacant for decades, and then there is this massive soil remediation project that ends up transforming the land again—but now as a site for public recreation and conservation education.”

Baumeister draws two important lessons from the story: “One is the importance of existing environmental laws that prevent something like the soil and water contamination we saw here from happening in the future. The other is that it’s possible—though definitely time consuming and expensive—to transform even a highly toxic waste site into a place for outdoor learning and fun.”



Stedman Foundry in 1931



Montana Wild in 2011

TOP TO BOTTOM: KENTON ROWE; JEREMIE HOLLIMAN; FWP

TOP TO BOTTOM: KENTON ROWE; MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY; LUKE DURAN/FWP



ANIMAL REPAIR BUSINESS Montana Wild's wildlife center takes in orphaned and injured wildlife such as black bears (top), mountain lions (right), and great horned owls (below). The animals are kept away from human contact as much as possible to preserve their wildness. That increases their chance of survival when returned back to the wild, a top goal of the center. New web cameras allow visitors on-site and viewers on-line to see the temporary residents without bothering them. "We're glad to know people care about these wild animals," says FWP official Thomas Baumeister. "That means they are connecting with wildlife and caring about what happens outdoors."



Helena and spent time at the Raptor Rehabilitation Center in Bozeman. In May it was returned to the ranch, where ranch hands and family members watched as Rhodin released the bird back to the wild.

Healing raptors, bears, and other injured wildlife—what Rhodin calls the “animal repair business”—is the primary work of the wildlife center. (Deer, elk, and moose are not taken in, to reduce the risk of spreading Chronic Wasting Disease, nor are small mammals and other common wildlife.) The facility contains a veterinary pharmacy and a hospital room with an operating table and a donated anesthesia machine. Medical work is done by Rhodin, a trained veterinary technician, as well as local veterinarians and technicians who volunteer their time. The facility’s two dozen volunteers also clean pens and transport animals. One volunteer even flies his own plane to pick up injured wildlife. “Without this outpouring of public support, we couldn’t operate,” says Rhodin.

Unlike in zoos, wildlife in the center are not allowed to see people. “These are wild animals going back into the wild as soon as possible,” Rhodin says. “We don’t want to habituate them to people in any way.” Two web cameras enable visitors on-site and viewers on-line to watch bear cubs and other temporary residents. At a new avian perching area, visitors can watch “ambassador birds,” resident raptors too injured to survive in the wild.

Recently Rhodin and FWP biologists put radio transmitters on orphaned bear cubs to see how they fare after release. “That’s one of the big unknowns in bear rehab. We don’t know if they den successfully over the winter, how they forage, how they reintroduce themselves to wild bear society, and if they reproduce,” Rhodin says.

As a visitor leaves the facility, he notices several marks on Rhodin’s hands and arms. She explains the scars came from years of working with wildlife. “I don’t mind,” she says. “In fact, the omerier and nastier they are, the better I like it. That means they’re wild enough to avoid humans and wild enough to survive when they get back outside.”

It also means the animals are still wild enough to be appreciated and conserved by people who continue to recognize that wildness—in both wildlife and wild places—is an essential part of the Montana lifestyle. 🐾

PHOTOS ON BOTH PAGES BY JESSE LEE VARNADO



RAPTOR RESCUE At the new wildlife center, coordinator Lisa Rhodin (center) assists veterinary technician Chelsey Whenham and veterinarian Matt Blandford in detoxifying a poisoned golden eagle found on a ranch near Fort Benton. A few months later, Rhodin released the recovered raptor back at the ranch, as ranch family members looked on. “People seem real happy there’s a facility like ours that’s available to help wildlife in need,” she says.

