

I'm thankful for FWP volunteers

Two elk hunters approach a barbed wire fence. One unloads his rifle and hands it to his partner, who lifts the top wire for easier crossing. Then she unloads her rifle and hands it over to him before ducking under the wire. Once across, the two reload and continue on their way.

Episodes of hunting safety like this, played out thousands of times across Montana each fall, are brought to you by Montana's roughly 1,500 volunteer Hunter and Bowhunter Education instructors. Generous with their time and committed to the public good, these instructors are among the thousands of Montanans who help our department each year.

FWP has a lot of responsibilities, and volunteers allow us to do far more with our limited funding than we could otherwise. Like the sportsman's club that buys a deer decoy for the local game warden, or the rancher who helps pay for a grizzly bear's GPS collar. A few years ago, more than 60 volunteers helped radio-tag 200 elk calves for FWP's groundbreaking Bitterroot elk study. Last year the volunteers at just one state park, First Peoples Buffalo Jump, donated 778 hours leading interpretive hikes, greeting guests at the visitor center, and doing maintenance.

Volunteers help our fisheries crews by shuttling vehicles, electrofishing, clipping fins, and placing used Christmas trees in reservoirs for perch spawning habitat. Others pick up litter at state parks, clear and groom snowmobile trails, help clean fish hatchery raceways, and pull invasive plants at fishing access sites.

At the Montana State Fair in Great Falls, volunteers help set up, tear down, and staff the FWP areas of the Nature's Den building. At our Montana WILD Outdoor Education Center in Helena, they lead education programs, help at the front desk, prepare food for injured raptors, and clean pens. Each year some 1,800 volunteers help out at fishing education clinics and events. And more than 800 volunteer anglers across Montana diligently log their fishing activity throughout the year and send their reports to our biologists to use for fisheries management.

All that generosity adds up fast. Last year volunteers across Montana donated more than 65,000 hours to FWP programs, the equivalent of more than 30 full-time staff positions.

That doesn't even include the contributions made by the seven FWP regional Citizen Advisory Councils, which provide public input that helps guide our management decisions. Or the conservation-minded citizens who have volunteered to be on the Greater Sage-Grouse Habitat Conservation Advisory Council, Fish & Wildlife Licensing and Funding Advisory Council, Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program Advisory Council, Snowmobile Advisory Com-

mittee, Private Land/Public Wildlife Council, State Trails Advisory Committee, Montana Wolf Management Advisory Council, River Recreation Advisory Committee, and half a dozen local river citizen advisory committees.

Then there's the millions of dollars worth of land donated by landowners to be added as wildlife management areas, state parks, and conservation easements, as well as the millions of dollars contributed to FWP programs by conservation and parks groups and their members.

And I can't forget the many FWP employees who regularly volunteer to work extra unpaid hours for their own research or management projects or lend a hand to their colleagues in the department.

Generosity to help fish, wildlife, and parks has a long history in Montana. As just one example, in 1912 the Stevensville Rod and Gun

Club sponsored two rail shipments of 100 Yellowstone National Park elk that they helped relocate in the Bitterroot Valley, part of early efforts to restore these big game animals in Montana. Over the ensuing century, volunteer action across the state has been at the heart of stream protection, public water fishing access advocacy, habitat conservation, river cleanups, youth hunts, and more.

What accounts for this outpouring of labor, funding, and

goodwill? I suspect that most volunteers' generosity comes from their passion for—and pride in—Montana's wildlife, fisheries, and state parks, and a desire to help conserve those resources and share their knowledge with others.

Many are like Chuck Ericson. A retired union pipefitter who also runs a ranch, Ericson puts his broad set of skills to work improving Milltown State Park. He has helped plant trees, clean up old dump sites along the Blackfoot River, and remove barbed wire fence. He's usually the first to show up for park volunteer events and one of the last to leave. To top it off, the quick-witted Missoulian enjoys working with the public, making him an even greater asset to this relatively new state park.

Those of us lucky enough to live here have a lot to be grateful for, from the spectacular scenery to the abundant outdoor recreation to the many remaining wild places that give Montana its rugged character. This holiday season, I'm also giving thanks to the people who volunteer their time to help us manage the fish, wildlife, and parks that add so much to this state's high quality of life.

—M. JEFF HAGENER, *Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Director*



Volunteers help young anglers at an FWP fishing derby at Glasgow's Home Run youth fishing pond.