

# Educating to engage, awaken, and inspire

**Y**ou'd think that in Montana, where fish and wildlife are so much a part of our heritage, culture, and daily life, kids would know what a mule deer or a trout is. But in truth, many don't.

FWP education specialists across the state report that a growing number of kids—both rural and urban—understand surprisingly little about Montana's outdoors. It could be that those children simply haven't been exposed to nature like so many of us were in the past. Whatever the reason, that lack of understanding does not bode well for Montana's future. If our kids don't know about fish and wildlife, they won't value those resources and work to sustain them, as generations of Montanans have done.

Fortunately, our department is active in schools and communities across Montana helping kids and adults gain outdoor skills and knowledge of the natural world. Our Hooked on Fishing Program teaches students in nearly 200 classrooms statewide about

in conservation. The center also teaches thousands of other Montanans, young and old, how to fly-fish, shoot a bow and arrow, paddle a kayak, and identify dozens of bird species.

Among the most popular features of Montana WILD are our "ambassador" hawks, falcons, eagles, and owls. These previously wounded raptors have recovered at the adjacent FWP wildlife rehabilitation center but are unable to survive in the wild. Trained volunteers carry the birds of prey around the center, giving visitors a memorable educational experience.

Much of our educational work is about unplugging kids from their cell phones and video games, inviting them outside, and showing them how to enjoy the natural world. Many kids still learn outdoor recreational skills from their parents, but a growing number don't. We fill that need. FWP programs expose many kids to their first experiences of catching a fish, holding an elk antler, or figuring out what type of bird is flying overhead. We want them to engage in the outdoors so they value and care about fish and wildlife. Then, as adults, they'll be more inclined to join us and others in caring for these resources that define Montana.

FWP's educational work isn't all foundational. We also run programs that help Montanans of all ages understand critical conservation issues. Our Bear Aware Program shows people how to reduce conflicts with grizzlies. FWP's Aquatic Invasive Species Program gives people a first-hand look at zebra mussels, demonstrates how they ruin lakes and irrigation, and explains what we all can do to stop the spread of these and other aquatic troublemakers.

One exciting recent example of an FWP educational project is the Sage-Grouse Challenge, a partnership of Montana WILD and the Missoula-based Inspired Classroom, an "interactive distance-learning" company. This year's pilot project used interactive live streaming in classrooms to connect teams of students and teachers across Montana with FWP sage-grouse experts in the field. Students learned about the iconic bird, then dove deep into the subject matter to develop land-use solutions that could help conserve the species. "The scenario was so believable that kids really bought into the challenge and were very focused on actually presenting an idea of how to best use the land," a

Hamilton teacher told us.

If kids anywhere need to experience and learn about the natural world, it's here in Montana. This state is all about the outside experience—camping, fishing, hunting, boating, hiking, fishing, and more. FWP's staff is dedicated to educating communities and youth about our clean water, healthy wildlife populations, and world-renowned fisheries, and how all of us can and must work together to keep Montana a place of beauty, wonder, and opportunity.

—**Martha Williams**, Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks



For many children across Montana, their first exposure to the natural world—like fishing, archery, or bird watching—comes from an FWP education specialist.

Montana's rivers, lakes, fish, and other aquatic life. Through FWP's Hunter and Bowhunter Education Programs, 1,500 volunteer instructors teach youth and adult hunters the basics of firearm and bowhunting safety, hunting ethics, and game animal identification. Over the past 25 years, our Becoming an Outdoors-Woman Program has introduced thousands of women to the joys of camping, canoeing, shooting, and outdoor cooking. At our Montana WILD education center in Helena, 2,500 to 4,000 school kids are bused in from across the state each year to learn about the state's mammals, fish, reptiles, and ecosystems, as well as the role that citizens play