



## AN OPEN BROOK: SPEAKING FOR THE STREAM

Eliza Wiley

**PLEASE ALLOW ME** to introduce myself. Until recently, many of you didn't know me. I used to live in a steep, incised channel. In the 1940s or 50s my stream bed was bulldozed into an irrigation channel and my water ran as dark as chocolate milk from the cut banks as high as 10 feet. I no longer had the vegetation and habitat to support the fish and birds that once called me home.

No one visited me. I'm Sevenmile Creek.

You're likely familiar with my Helena Valley family: Tenmile, into which I flow, and Prickly Pear creeks. They, by comparison, thrived.

They were improved, cared for and valued, to the point where they can provide valuable drinking and irrigation water. They get lots of attention, especially when they spill wildly over their banks.

But then, about four years ago, a wonderful thing happened. I was acquired by the Prickly Pear Land Trust and its benevolent and hard-working team, namely the National Guard at Fort Harrison and Lewis & Clark County. I was given a new lease on life!

### Here's what the "new" me looks like:

My channelized, mean, murky stretch has been re-routed into a friendly, meandering creek. My banks now support hundreds of willows that help reduce erosion. For much of the year I run clean and clear. My new creek bed and my old channel, which is now a series of ponds, are becoming home to a variety of vegetation, birds, fish, mammals, and reptiles.

**Some 147 species of birds have been identified, including entirely new sectors of species like dabblers and ducks, on the 350-acre parcel that PPLT acquired.**

Speaking of birds, some 147 species have been identified, including entirely new sectors of species like dabblers and ducks, on the 350-acre parcel that PPLT acquired. Wow! And fish? Through my troubled life this century, I didn't see many. With my restored stream bed course and removal of an irrigation diversion, I now support a growing family of brown and brook trout and

sculpin. Their populations were documented recently by our friends at Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Trout love the new habitat.

My land, which was not long ago in need of rest, is now thriving. Grasslands abound and my riparian zones host a variety of natives—the willows, cottonwoods, chokecherries, and golden currents, among them. Sure, the weeds are a tough customer to combat, but we're gaining ground every day.

Perhaps I'm most proud of the visitors I see from Carroll College and Helena's PAL high school classes. They call me an "outdoor classroom," which tickles me to no end. PPLT is devoted to connecting students with nature and, boy, are they. "For us to have a future in conservation we need to make it relevant to other folks," says Nate Kopp, staffer at the land trust. "We help get people outside and connected to the landscape."

With guidance from their professor, Travis Almquist, the Carroll students study what they call my "substrate," or the inorganic and organic materials that comprise my stream bed. They helped transplant hundreds of willows.

They measure and document my substrate, water flows, and the bugs, among other things. "Students are inspired by this hands-on work," Travis says. His biology and environmental science majors don't "just passively learn this stuff, but engage in that learning and hopefully go somewhere with it." I say "Amen, professor!"

Water Quality Protection District education staff, led by Val Stacey, work alongside the students. They've established baseline data about me, which is invaluable in charting my progress and future. "Sevenmile truly provides an excellent avenue to educate the general public and students on

water issues as an outdoor classroom," says Val.

What's more, the Prickly Pear Land Trust and its partners aren't done. They plan to restore the final stretch of my 2.2-mile run very soon. Next fall, another meandering segment will be developed with vegetation to grow the following spring. Oh boy!

Whether it's pulling together to help finance all of this—about \$600,000 has been spent to date—the scientific collaboration, the pull-up-your-sleeves volunteer work or the meaningful education opportunities, I'm most impressed by how all these different pieces have come together.

**Above: Newly restored "Reach 3" of Sevenmile Creek on Prickly Pear's property enjoys its reconstructed and raised floodplain and grows riparian plants along its shores. Below: Sevenmile's new ponds now host solitary sandpipers, not seen there before.**



# DON'T FENCE ME IN: AFTER 20 YEARS

## MARTIN MILLER'S FUN RUN STILL REACHES NEW PEAKS

TO SAY THAT MARTIN MILLER likes to run is, well, an understatement of great proportions. Some of us only fantasize about running a marathon. Martin ran four marathons in December ... in four days, and—you guessed it—in four states at the Four Corners Quad Keyah, sponsored by the Navajo Nation. Then there's the Across the Years event in Phoenix where folks see how far they can run between Dec. 28 and Jan. 7, circling a one-mile route. For Martin: 418 miles in 10 days. You do the math.



Brad Hurd

And miles logged in a year? He keeps a spreadsheet of course. From 1987 to 2019, he's averaged 1,796 miles per year!

While on the subject of understatements, it's safe to say the 68-year-old course director of the annual Don't Fence Me In Trail Run comes with impeccable credentials. It was 20 years ago that his work colleague Kris Larson asked Martin to "put together a trail race and fundraiser" for Prickly Pear Land Trust. "She said she'd be responsible for the cookies and I for the hills. So, if they complained they'd come to me," says Martin, of the inaugural 5K and 12K runs. "Neither one of us slept for a whole year while he designed the course and figured out the timing," recalls Kris. "I figured out how to get free T-shirts, ask fourth graders to contribute the artwork and contact other landowners to see if we could cross their land." She talked her friends into making free trophies out of Playdough.

**Snow, rain, or sleet, Martin Miller is always on his feet.**

Back then, the races started at the Old Shooting Range. That first year a car approached right after the starting gun went off and pulled into the ditch to pass the runners. There weren't many runners. "There were so few, it broke my heart," says Kris. Martin handled the timing, which involved tearing off runners' numbers, placing them on a coat-hanger spindle, then matching them with times from a program that their friends at work had developed. It took hours, he says, to compile the results.

Fast forward 20 years and you'll see more than 1,000 trail runners at this May's DFMI. For the first time the offerings will include a 20K race in addition to the 5, 12 and 30K events, plus the wildly popular 5K dog walk.

While Martin jokes that he can be seen as "the designated villain of the event," his overriding goal is to "ensure runners have a memorable experience." Maybe the "villain" comes from his wry understating of the rigors of the trail runs. He describes, for instance, the mountainous 12K layout as "gently rolling." It probably is ... to Martin.

### UPDATE

**The 20th Annual Don't Fence Me In Trail Run has been impacted by the CDC's restrictions for social gatherings due to COVID-19.**

**PPLT's trail run will now be a virtual trail run and trail challenge. Please go to the events page of our website to learn more about how everyone—all ages, all abilities—can be involved! Sign up at [pricklypearlt.org/events](http://pricklypearlt.org/events).**

There are notable milestones over the 20 years of DFMI that Martin mentions but takes no credit for: an exponential increase in participants; that the majority of the 12K runners are women; or that Jim Walmsely, one of the country's top trail runners, got his start at DFMI while stationed at Malmstrom Air Force Base. Instead, Martin just keeps showing up, every year, to put in the extra mileage for lands and trails.

As part of DFMI's 20th anniversary, Martin and the team came up with a new 20K route to add to the traditional 30K, 12K, 5K and non-competitive dog walk.

## SNAILS, SNAILS, THE GANG'S ALL HERE

Martin Miller also leads a cadre of trail running devotees as the "coach" and spirited leader of the Happy Snails running club, a Prickly Pear group that first began to help train newcomers for the annual DFMI. Now in its third year, the Snails are undeterred by tough winter trail conditions. The past two winters have found them trudging through knee-deep drifts while ascending the Top of the World or Mount Ascension trails.

The cheerful camaraderie of their twice-weekly training runs can be infectious. Martin posts their Tuesday (noon) and Saturday (9 a.m.) workout plans on the Snails' Facebook page and summarizes each session with a graph, showing mileage run and altitude gained.

His fellow Snails often chime in on the site, adding to that camaraderie.

Ty House is among the Snail stalwarts. "I came to the very first (run) and have been here ever since," she said before a February run. From those initial runs she's "graduated" to even competing in the 50K Deadhorse Ultra in Moab, Utah.

It's all Martin's fault," she jokes of her newly found running ambition. "I just keep showing up. It's really a fun, supportive group of people. There's some accountability. Once you establish yourself as a Snail and don't show up you'll hear about it. Maybe a "we missed you." "There's no pressure to perform with the Snails," she says. "Everybody accepts you for who you are and where you're at."



**A Happy Snails running group victory lap. The "no pressure" group has been running non-stop for two years.**



## OUTDOOR CLASSROOMS HELP STUDENTS FIND THEIR OWN WAY

THE OUTDOORS, for many kids, is an unparalleled learning environment. That was clear on a recent field trip with students from Helena's Project for Alternative Learning. The program was led by Blake Sexton, an AmeriCorps and Big Sky Watershed Corps member who's recently begun a 10-month stint with the Prickly Pear Land Trust's education program.

The site was the venerable Waterline Trail and the subject was property rights. Tough subject in which to fully engage a dozen teenagers? Not in the least. The class began at the school with a spirited card game demonstrating the "tragedy of the commons," a theory where individuals, driven by their self interests, behave contrary to

the common good of all users. They were quick studies.

Next stop: the trailhead and a study of the PPLT trail map to identify both public and private land ownership. Then, a tutorial on definitions of each in the context of the "tragedy of commons."

Blake: "Who owns public lands?" Students: "The government." Blake: "Who owns the government?" Students: "We do. Everybody in the U.S." Blake: "That's right. It's owned by a ton of people who have different ideas of what they want to do with it."

Then, a march up the hillside to Rodney Ridge, ingesting, step-by-step, the winter glories of a public trail. "They love it," says Emily Petersen, a PAL science teacher who first accompanied her students on PPLT field trips last spring, the initial year of a PPLT program begun by Callie Schultz, an Americorps VISTA member. "It's their favorite class. They'll talk about it for a month. It's rare for something to make that big of an impression."

**Project for Alternative Learning students use a trail map to learn about private and public land ownership.**

"We spend as much time out of the classroom as possible," adds Ryan Cooney, a PAL social studies teacher. "These are not activities these kids would do if it were not for the partnership between PAL and PPLT."

"We have eight lesson plans," explains Blake, who moved to Helena two years ago for a state Department of Commerce residence program on Flood and Wildfire resilience, after earning a degree in environmental policy from the University of Michigan. "We want to connect students, on the ground, with work PPLT and its partners in the community are doing ... to inspire the next generation."

Last year, a PPLT needs assessment of area environmental education determined that there was a gap in connecting high school students with the outdoors. While the PAL students comprised the first-year classes, this year the program will be extended to Capital High, Helena High and East Helena High schools as well as Access for Success (Helena College) and a GED program for non-traditional students.

Some thirty volunteers, with appropriate expertise, have stepped forward to help conduct lessons that range from learning about invasive species and plant identification, stream restoration using the Sevenmile project as a case study, conservation easements, and Montana native people's histories.

**"We want to connect students, on the ground, with work PPLT and its partners are doing... to inspire the next generation."**

The lesson plans, written by Callie and fine-tuned by Blake, comply with state common core standards as well as next-generation science standards.

The Stream Health lesson plan, for example, provides background on riparian zones, flora, fauna, sediments in flood plains, and species of greatest concern including macroinvertebrates. Activities include sampling and rocky bottom stream study. The hands-on work and getting in the stream in waders is always a big hit.

Anyone interested in joining PPLT's education program volunteer corps, please reach out to Blake at [education@pricklypearlt.org](mailto:education@pricklypearlt.org) to find out about training and our outdoor classroom schedule.



Brad Hurd

# AMIABLE AVIANS

## SEVENMILE STALWART SHANE SATER SHARES HIS SECRETS

**INSATIABLE**, optimistic, visionary.

Those words were chosen by Janice Miller to introduce Shane Sater as the speaker at a recent meeting of the Last Chance Audubon Society. Impressive credentials for a college sophomore. Janice, president of the local Audubon Society, knows Shane well. She's partnered with him on many of the 110 bird surveys he has led at the Sevenmile Creek stream restoration site over the past three years. After his animated talk, punctuated with his beautiful bird calls and a palpable mastery and fondness of the subjects at hand, Janice's accolades ring true.

When Shane landed in Helena in 2016 he says he "felt he didn't know enough about the landscape." To remedy that, he hooked up with the Audubon birders on their annual Christmas bird survey. Birds, to Shane, are a vehicle for understanding a place. Janice, in turn, introduced Shane to the

**The restored habitat—including shrubs along the stream, vegetation growth in the floodplain areas, and the new ponds—all have been vital to numerous bird species.**

Prickly Pear Land Trust and what has become an exhaustive—insatiable—study of Sevenmile birds was born. Joining with Audubon and PPLT folks, a survey "protocol" was drafted, calling for year-round surveys. "We've largely stuck to the original intent, thoroughly documenting birds on that site and what they're doing," Shane says.

The restorative measures at Sevenmile are described by him as "really phenomenal. Sevenmile compares favorably with the greatest birding sites around Helena." For birds, Sevenmile is "an airport terminal (migration hub), a college campus (learning center) and a supermarket (food source), all in one." The restored habitat—including shrubs along the stream, vegetation growth in the floodplain (riparian) areas, and the new ponds—all have been vital to numerous bird species. He readily ticks off what he sees as remarkable changes in the bird world of Sevenmile. Among them:

- Last summer, 10 pairs of **red-winged blackbirds** were nesting near the ponds.

- Sevenmile's new ponds host **solitary sandpipers**, not seen there before.

- **Rusty blackbirds**, the rarest blackbird and in decline, have been sighted in fall surveys the past two years.

- Multiple species of **ducks** have arrived with conclusive evidence of nesting.

- **American dippers** forage and nest along the stream, which provides invertebrates that they dive and submerge to eat.

- Twenty **swallows** at a time have been seen feeding over the ponds.

After devoting some 500 hours surveying birds at Sevenmile, and identifying 147 species, Shane's optimism shines through. "There's so much more that remains to be seen," he says. He and his colleagues are merely at the "tip of the iceberg of learning how special Sevenmile is." Thanks to the supporters of Prickly Pear Land Trust, this incredible conservation and habitat work continues.



**Naturalist Shane Sater attends Carroll College and provides data to PPLT and Helena's Last Chance Audubon chapter.**

**A red-winged blackbird screams out its long call, the background rhythm in a riparian concerto.**



**Reminder: Restoration work is ongoing at the Sevenmile Creek property, so the site will remain closed to the general public.**

Janice Miller

Shane Sater

## WELCOME INGRID LOVITT, PPLT DEVELOPMENT MANAGER

**IF YOU WANT** to feel the aura of the Prickly Pear Land Trust, spend a few minutes with Ingrid Lovitt.

You'll get the picture. And that picture—of "connecting land and people"—is what PPLT's new development manager not only deftly articulates but believes in from the bottom of her heart.

While she's been on the job just nine months, you get the impression that she's been doing it forever. But she's quick to deflect any credit for achievement on her part.



It's all about the people, she reiterates. Those people, for starters, being her colleagues at the land trust. "I've never witnessed a group of people who care so much about what they're doing," she says. The PPLT team, she says, is "very integrated. And the synergies that result from that are incredible."

But the excitement she effuses about people quickly extends to the community that built the land trust. Ingrid calls PPLT "truly a grassroots" entity, a factor that strikes a cord when she's calling on potential donors, near or far, large or small.

A graduate of Capital High School and the University of Montana (environmental studies and poetry), Ingrid was amazed to see what PPLT had become in the 20 years she'd been away from Helena. When she graduated high school, the land trust had just hired its first paid employee and was a year away from its initial land purchases and transfers that began what's become the South Hills Trail System.

"To come back and to see what Prickly Pear was doing..." she says, shaking her head in wonderment. Her role, she explains, requires "adapting to what's been a dramatic evolution of this organization." That evolution includes "trying to develop and expand grant

funding while thinking more regionally," and identifying and pursuing new funding sources.

She loves "telling the Prickly Pear story," a story that's "an investment people can be proud of.... We can show outside sources the commitment we have in our community" that includes its grass-roots heritage, a history of effective private-public partnerships, and advancing larger-scale thinking about connectivity in conservation. "My role has to do with community, sharing the story of a community-built organization and the invaluable relationships between land and people. It's great to be back in the greater Missouri River ecosystem!"

## TRAIL UPDATES FROM AROUND THE VALLEY

### TENMILE CREEK PARK

The most exciting news is the sizable increase in users Tenmile is seeing. PPLT is keeping pace with that growth by increasing the amenities of our newest trail system. A shade structure will be added this spring near the new restroom. The dynamic Helena group, Girls Thrive, will help with the project. Funding support comes from Mountain Hardware and The Base Camp. There will be new signage, featuring our favorite advocate for keeping trails happy, the hiking and biking bear.

### BROOKLYN BRIDGE

Led by the Forest Service and implemented by PPLT, this exciting, multi-use project is moving ahead. The 8-mile route will begin at a parking pullout at the crest of the Oro Fino Road south of Unionville and end at the Old Shooting Range trailhead. (If you're looking for a bridge, forget it. It's named after an old mine.) The Forest Service has completed its environmental (NEPA) and anthropological analyses. An official survey of the route should be completed this year. Next, the footprint of the trail, which will be separate from the existing old road,

will be charted and trail work, also contracted, will commence with a goal of opening the trail by the end of summer 2021.

### SCRATCHGRAVEL HILLS

Our icy trails this winter may have caused some hikers and joggers to look north, to the "Scratchies" with their southern exposure and inspiring vistas. Potential of this close-in, 5,800-acre non-motorized mecca is enormous. PPLT and trail enthusiasts far and wide are awaiting a draft proposal from their BLM friends. Additional public input will help guide the next steps.

### EAST HELENA GREENWAY

The recent (November 2019) signing of a restoration plan includes \$3.2 million for developing a trail system that will encircle East Helena and extend south to Montana City. As PPLTers recall, we received funding in 2015 to plan the process for a trail corridor. A feasibility study that included two open houses for public input has been a key part of developing the vision.

**PPLT staff "groundtruth" potential East Helena Greenway trails.**

Negotiations continue between PPLT and the Montana Environmental Trust Group (METG) for the transfer of more than 300 acres of the former ASARCO smelter property that's essential to development of the trail corridor. (METG had the fiduciary responsibility to dispose of the ASARCO assets, following ASARCO's bankruptcy.) "We're primed to engage with a consulting firm to

start more final versions of the plan and design of the corridor," says PPLT's Andrea Silverman, who is spearheading the effort for the land trust.

### SOUTH HILLS

PPLT, as always, continues its partnership with the USFS and the City of Helena to maintain the trails within the South Hills trail system.



Eliza Wiley

**TRAIL MIX**

**WELCOME NEW PPLT SUPPORTERS**

These members joined between November 1, 2019 and February 29, 2020:

- |                           |                      |                        |
|---------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| Ashley Adams              | Scott Falkowski      | Betsy Pennington       |
| Judy Anderson             | Kevin Ferris         | Corie Rice             |
| Charles Avery             | David Highness       | Kathy Samson           |
| Jim & Sally Bogaert       | & Patty Hartman      | Nathan Stein           |
| Cindy Brooks              | Linsey & Cody Hollow | Dave & Christy Stergar |
| Marilyn Carlin            | Julie Johnson        | Lila & Jeff Thomas     |
| Glenn & Beverly Clevenger | & Eric Pritchard     | Deb and Ed Tyanich     |
| Don Cornish               | Michael Loo          | Theresa Van Wyk        |
| Bill & Jody Crane         | Mike & Janice Moore  | John Walden            |
| Phyllis Dagenais          | Amy Pearson          | Ashley Werner          |
| Abe & Katja Elias         | & Rory Ruffner       | Catherine Wright       |
|                           | Brian Pendergast     |                        |

**MARK YOUR CALENDAR FOR THESE UPCOMING PPLT EVENTS**

- |                  |                                                               |                  |                                         |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| <b>May 18-22</b> | Wildflower Week<br>Interpretive Trails<br>National Trails Day | <b>July 8</b>    | Hawk Walk –<br>Tenmile Creek Park       |
| <b>June 6</b>    | PPLT at the<br>Farmer's Market                                | <b>July 18</b>   | PPLT at the Farmer's Market             |
| <b>June 20</b>   | Trail Work Night                                              | <b>July 20</b>   | Trail Work Night                        |
| <b>June 22</b>   | Family Hike –<br>Diehl Dr. Trailhead                          | <b>July 23</b>   | Family Hike –<br>Bompart Hill Trailhead |
| <b>June 25</b>   |                                                               | <b>August 20</b> | Stars in the Park<br>Night Event        |

Visit [pricklypearlt.org](http://pricklypearlt.org) for more information and updates on these events.

Follow Prickly Pear Land Trust on social media and sign up on our website for our monthly emails with project and event updates!



Volunteer on the trails with us: June 6, June 22, July 20

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SPRING 2020

**DFMI TRAIL CHALLENGE**

SEE PAGE 2 FOR IMPORTANT DETAILS

**INTRODUCING THE NEW SEVENMILE**

**TRAIL PROJECT UPDATES**

