

# open views

Our mission is to inspire connections to the landscapes, water, wildlife, recreation and agricultural heritage of west-central Montana through conservation, now and for future generations.



PRICKLY PEAR  
LAND TRUST

FALL 2020 NEWSLETTER OF PRICKLY PEAR LAND TRUST

connecting land and people

## WHERE THE ELK ROAM

### UPPER LEGRANDE LAND ADDED TO HELENA PUBLIC LANDS

WHEN PPLT'S TRAVIS VINCENT leads a walking tour through the recently acquired property, his excitement and admiration for the 55-acre parcel is palpable. He praises how well Paul Graham, the most recent

landowner and PPLT partner, has cared for the property, be it intensive weed mitigation or fuels reduction. Travis points out where an elk herd winters and he strolls through two small meadows that the herd finds accommodating.

Plus, it's protected. He notes the State Trust land to the west, the City of Helena property to the east and the expansive Forest Service domain to the south make it nearly surrounded by public lands. The acquisition, Mr. Graham adds, "opens up that whole mountain for public access."

**Two small meadows on the property provide winter range for elk herds.**

Travis loves the rugged and varied terrain. "With all the different features it makes it (appear) a lot larger than 55 acres," he says. The geology alone, with its impressive outcrops, is an attraction. Craig Stiles of Helena, summarized the

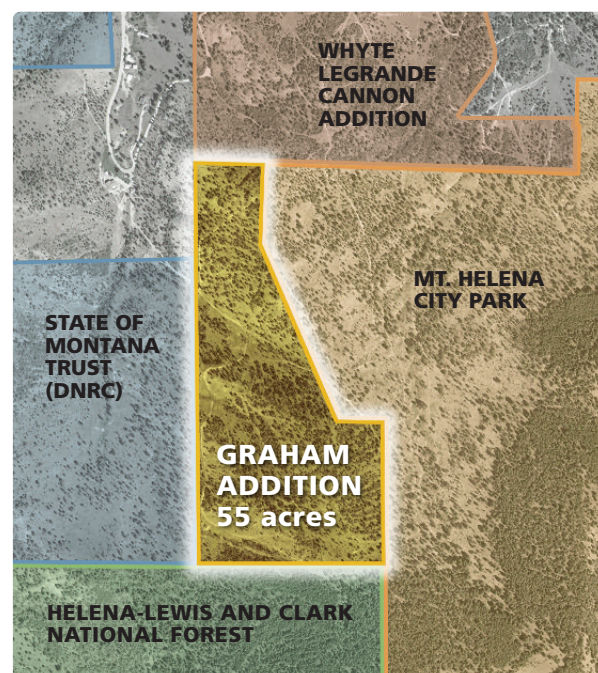
rock outcroppings typical to Mt. Helena and the addition, "... from us local retired geologists who hunt the elusive stromatolites of the Precambrian rocks around us. Simply the single most important

contributor to initial oxygenation of our planet, and consequently life, exists on these lands for anyone to see and contemplate."

Paul logged the property in 2001 and again in 2007, pointing out how healthy the remaining stands of Ponderosa, Douglas fir, juniper and even a couple of white pines are. "When the beetle kill hit, we had very little (infestation)," a fact he attributes to proactive forestry.

As the Land Trust's project lead, Travis helped shepherd the acquisition of the property, working with the Department of Defense to secure the majority of the project funds through the Army Compatible Use Buffer program. The project also received funding from onX Maps and a donation from the landowners, Paul and his wife Becky, whose family had owned the land since the 1960s.

The parcel, which sits on the northwest flank of Mount Helena and is adjacent to the recently acquired LeGrande addition, is within one mile of Fort Harrison, making it eligible for the funding, Col. Todd Verrill told the *Independent Record*. As with other Prickly Pear acquisitions on Mount Helena, the property has been transferred to the City of Helena, which, in turn, will manage it as part of its open space lands. While the land should ultimately provide an extension of recreation opportunities to the west of the Mount Helena trail system, there are no immediate



**The 55-acre parcel is nearly surrounded by public lands. Top: overlooking the property on the northwest flank of Mt. Helena.**

development plans, according to Helena Parks, Recreation and Open Lands Director, Kristi Ponozzo.

Initially, the city will continue to look at fuels and weeds treatment and "are thinking about a recreation planning process as part of the adjacent LeGrande Cannon trail property. We'll look at it holistically," she says, while weighing "the use, access and amenities of what the community wants."

This latest addition to Helena's impressive public lands portfolio again is testimony to what can occur when local organizations work together. "It's a theme of teamwork," says PPLT Executive Director, Mary Hollow. "We're all in this together, for the greater good of all of us who live in this community— PPLT, the city, the Montana Army National Guard, onX Maps, the landowner."





# SEEN FIRE AND RAIN

*The burn allowed work on the final segment to continue.*

Kevin League

## SEVENMILE CREEK RESTORATION SURVIVES AND HEADS TOWARD COMPLETION

SEPTEMBER 2 was another hot, windy day in the Helena Valley. When a fire sparked near where Birdseye Road crosses the railroad tracks, it took little time before some 800 acres were consumed. "It was extreme fire behavior," according to Chris Spliethof, incident commander with the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.

At the heart of the inferno was Sevenmile Creek, site of an ongoing stream restoration project spearheaded by Prickly Pear Land Trust. From a distance, it appeared that the 2.2-mile stretch of creek and its surrounding 350 acres were charred beyond hope.

But just a month afterwards, the devastation appears not so devastating.

The restoration project's largest wetland, which covers about an acre and a half, was spared. "The fire left it untouched," Jeff Ryan, district supervisor of the Lewis & Clark Conservation District, said during an October tour. "Wetlands are resilient. Fire could even stimulate growth." Many willows, painstakingly transplanted in recent years to provide habitat (147 species of birds had been identified on the site) and mitigate erosion, may have survived. The fire could "firm up that (willow) root mass," Jeff added. "Mark my words, they're going to come up from the

roots." Jeff continued a discussion about another round of willow transplanting with PPLT tour host, Nate Kopp.

Fencing — some five miles of it — took a beating as did gates. Likely by next year, the fencing will be replaced by a four-strand barbed wire at a height that's more wildlife-friendly. One upside is that work on the final segment of restoration was able to continue. The burn allowed the contractors to do the work, when just weeks earlier, they had been concerned about starting a fire.

**Just a month after the 800-acre fire at Sevenmile Creek, the devastation appears not so devastating.**

The work is expected to be completed by the end of November. It entails creating a new channel and plugging the former channel, with the dirt coming from the excavation of the wetlands area. The final phase, with a cost of \$300,000, is being funded by Northwestern Energy, Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, a Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation 223 grant, the Willow Springs Foundation and a variety of private and individual donations. This will complete the restoration that began in 2016.

## HATS OFF TO AN OLD HAT

### NATE KOPP CELEBRATES 5 YEARS WITH PPLT, 10 YEARS IN TRAILS

WHEN COMMUNITY MEMBERS are asked what they think of when they think of Prickly Pear Land Trust, many answer "open space and trails!" Trails and access to the outdoors is a fundamental part of the land trust's history and mission. So it stands to reason that the chief trail guru for PPLT is Nate Kopp, a seasoned staffer who you may recognize as the organization's lead

**"By so many measures, Nate is the engine that keeps projects on track and on budget."**

—PPLT Executive Director Mary Hollow

an extensive background in trails and he's performed well in every aspect of our trails since. And that's all in addition to his broader conservation roles."

"Nate dove into the [4-year, nearly million dollar] Sevenmile restoration project with both feet," said Mary. "And it's been incredibly successful, in part because he works so well with partners and knows when to assess risk or further explore a

position. Nate is a learner, is curious, and unafraid of new challenges." She describes how she might pitch him a new assignment: "Hey, Nate, want to try this?"

The attribute Mary most admires? "He does not have an ego that gets in the way with people's opinions on or emotions around trail issues. He's an incredible rock in our broader programming — and super fun and reliable. By so many measures, he's the engine that keeps projects on track and on budget," she says, exemplified by his Sevenmile, Tenmile Creek Park, trails and recreation work.

To describe Nate and his wife, Julia, as trail gurus is no overstatement. The couple met doing trail work for the American Conservation Experience in Santa Cruz, Calif. Their devotion to trail and conservation work took them from California to Vermont to North

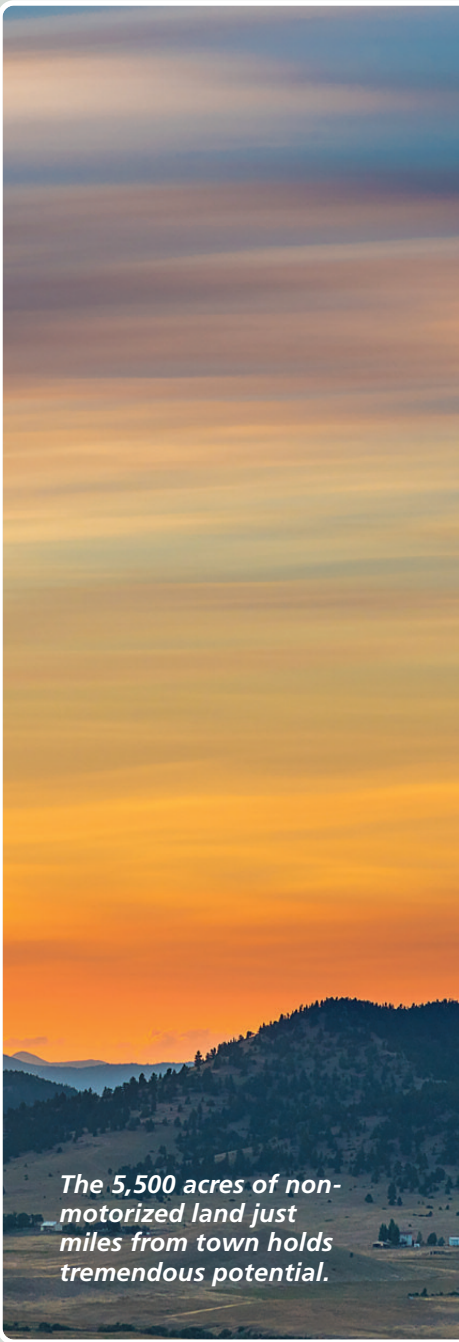
Carolina, working with and leading youth conservation groups. "We spent more days in a tent in those three to four years than in a house," recalls Nate. It wasn't until 2015, when they moved to Helena, that they started "sleeping under a roof and four walls." Their trail work ranged from hiking and wilderness trails, to equestrian-focused and mountain biking trails, a fitting resume for his PPLT job.

He sees a uniqueness to Helena trails that is both a blessing and a challenge. "It's very rare to have a system that's this large, feels wild, and is this close to town." That accessibility brings different pressures, causing extra strain. "It's crucial," he says, "to recognize the different expectations of what people want to get (from trails)."

The land trust does an annual trails inventory to help prioritize its efforts. Safety is at the top of the list, explains Nate. And certainly an endless list of maintenance needs. He must also meet the contractual requirements PPLT has with the city and the cost-share programs in place with the Forest Service. Most importantly, he says, he always keeps an ear to the ground. And while Mary is his supervisor, the community is his boss. As Nate says, "I can practically base my performance on how many people we can have outside on the trails having a safe and fun time."



Kevin League



*The 5,500 acres of non-motorized land just miles from town holds tremendous potential.*

# PROACTIVE PLAY

## PITCHING A REGIONAL PARKS DISTRICT

**ANYONE OUT** on the vast trail system in the South Hills and Tenmile Creek Park this summer knows that the trails are experiencing unprecedented use. “More people are making the trails a part of their daily lives,” says Mary Hollow, PPLT Executive Director. “There simply is more discovery of these amenities,” she says. John Beaver, board president adds, “We’ve observed a tremendous increase in outdoor activity and use. It’s a counter-balance to being indoors.”

While Mary, John and their colleagues are delighted to see the booming popularity — that is, after all, their intent — they view it with some trepidation. “We are not going to be able to meet the demands without a public partner at a more regional level,” Mary explains. That “public partner”

could come in the form of a regional park district, whose boundaries might be defined as the Greater Helena area, extending to East Helena, Montana City, and the North Valley where the demand for parks and open space recreational areas have increased. In addition, with substantial new trail developments including the East Helena Greenway, the Scratchgravel Hills or the Brooklyn Bridge, the constituency of trail users in our area will likely broaden even more.

The idea of a regional park district is a thought that’s been vetted for a while, the duo notes. Northern Jefferson County residents, explains Mary, have been interested in working with PPLT, Lewis and Clark County and the City of Helena on creating this kind of partnership. The timing has not been right in recent years as a Helena school

bond (\$63 million approved in 2017) and a county jail improvement bond (\$6.5 million passed in 2017) took precedence. But now, the time may be more favorable. “If it’s explained well and people understand it, there will be significant buy-in,” says Beaver.

As a priority for taxpayers, Lewis and Clark County Commissioner Andy Hunthausen thinks it could work its way back to the top in time. He said a feasibility study done a number of years ago offered different options, among them a district that had a 10-mile radius, including East Helena and northern Jefferson County.

A ballot measure would have to be initiated by the county commissioners.

**With substantial new trail developments, the constituency of trail users in our area will likely broaden even more.**

It would ask voters, first, if they favored establishing a district and, second, if they

were willing to pay for it. It would have its own board. “I personally am open to those questions being presented to the taxpayers,” Hunthausen said. He noted that he’s just one vote among the three-member commission.

Kristi Ponozzo, the Helena Parks, Recreation and Open Lands Director, sees significant benefits from such a district. Helena’s recreational lands are “open to everyone and used by everyone, beyond the city and the county. The more we can look at it regionally, the better we can provide for the entire community.”

# THANK YOU, LEROY!

**WHEN LEROY SCHRAMM** joined the Prickly Pear Land Trust board some 15 years ago, there were three staffers. The group’s annual operating budget was \$200,000, at best. Helena’s trail system was more of a dream or vision than anything. “When we started, the trail system in the South Hills it was an informal system of old Jeep trails, unmarked game trails,” he recalls. And the idea of securing land—the backdrop of the state Capitol—through easements and purchases was, in his mind, “way too big of a project” given PPLT’s size.

“But Andy Baur and the board members were dogged. They kept chipping away. They proved me—thankfully—wrong.”

It’s a humble man who counts among the major achievements of a long board tenure a land acquisition

strategy that he initially opposed. PPLT’s ability to draw community support for those acquisitions is “an achievement that most surprises me,” LeRoy says.

LeRoy, who served for 25 years as chief legal counsel for the Montana University System, has a keen attention to detail. Executive Director, Mary Hollow, admits “he’s the guy who will catch minute errors that can have major consequences.” His level of professionalism in regards to board governance, bylaws, articles of incorporation and contracts were invaluable, she said. “He would ask the tough questions. ‘What if ...’ or ‘Have we thought about this ...’”

Former PPLT Board President, Jim Utterback, who has served for six years with LeRoy on the group’s Executive Committee, shares Mary’s admiration. “I don’t know what Prickly Pear would

have done without him. He never said ‘no’ to a request to take a look at something. Just a tremendous, unselfish individual.” His strategic and critical thinking was a board contribution that Mary said she not only relied on, but enjoyed. The feeling was mutual on LeRoy’s part. “The growth of Prickly Pear is directly related to the last two directors (Andy and Mary),” he says. “They both fit the organization well. It’s really been a joy to watch those two work. It makes board work easy. And he “can’t say enough” about the staff and its dedication to the mission.

He also marvels at the “enormous community support we’ve had through the years” and how Prickly Pear is viewed as a valuable part of the community. “It’s been rewarding to be able to contribute to that — as a board member — in a small way,” says



**“It’s been rewarding to contribute to how Prickly Pear is viewed as a valuable part of the community.”**

LeRoy. The legions of people who have worked with or benefited from LeRoy Schramm know his contributions to Prickly Pear Land Trust have been anything but “small.”

# OUR SCRATCHGRAVEL STANCE

## PPLT SUBMITS BALANCED-USE SUGGESTION IN BLM RECREATION AREA

**THE SCRATCHGRAVEL HILLS**, 5,500 acres of non-motorized Bureau of Land Management land just a few miles northwest of town, hold tremendous potential for outdoor recreation. Just how that potential should be realized depends on who you ask. There are hikers, horseback riders, mountain bikers and naturalists among the stakeholders. There are the considerations of adjacent landowners as well.

Recognizing the diversity of stakeholders, the BLM’s Butte Field Office, which oversees the area, embarked on a Recreation Area Management Plan (RAMP) this summer to gather and assess those interests. Prickly Pear Land Trust has dutifully weighed in on the recreation plan. “The Scratchgravels are a well-loved and well-used landscape,” said John Beaver, board president. “Prickly Pear has had a longstanding interest ... to accommodate as many interests as possible.”

Beaver and Nate Kopp, PPLT Program and Trails Director, were among the dozen members of a diverse community ad hoc committee of user-groups. Representatives from bikers, hikers, equestrians, and neighboring landowners met seven times and invested more than 250 hours studying the plan and suggesting a satisfactory alternative for all parties.

In a nutshell, they favored a sustainable management solution with equity among user groups, reduced environmental impacts, and respect for adjacent property owner rights and concerns.

The Land Trust’s Conservation and Recreation Committee similarly reviewed and discussed the recreation plan in depth. “The ad hoc committee came to some of the same conclusions as our internal committee,” said Beaver.

PPLT’s board, in turn, outlined in a 4½ -page letter to the BLM the land trust’s view that a new, alternative plan, Alternative C, could split the difference between the two alternatives proposed in the BLM’s original plan. In the letter, PPLT suggests that the Scratchgravel Hills project “represents a real opportunity for a community win for non-motorized recreation of all kinds, while also reducing impacts to homeowners and addressing environmental issues such as noxious weeds.” More specifically, the letter reads, “PPLT supports a multi-use trail design standard that can accommodate the three predominant user groups on the trail system: hikers, mountain bikers, and equestrians.” In its

recommendations, PPLT’s alternative provides for approximately 40 miles of trails, not the proposed 80, and utilizing the existing footprint when feasible. While e-bikes of certain lower-impact classes are permitted in places like Tenmile Creek Park, PPLT’s alternative recommends a no e-bike policy in keeping with the 2009 decision designating the Scratchgravels as a non-motorized recreation area.

The land trust supports a meaningful annual maintenance funding that could include a seasonal trail steward position. BLM funding and “agency engagement” are essential to making the management plan sustainable, said Beaver.

Further, PPLT advocates for greater management of invasive weeds and addressing issues of maintaining roads leading to the trailhead, and maintaining good relationships with Scratchgravel neighbors.

Beaver praised the “honest, frank and polite conversations,” of the process and acknowledged that we all stand to benefit. “I feel good about the collaborative effort and hope we can continue in that spirit.”

The PPLT letter can be found at [pricklypearlt.org/2020-trail-projects/](http://pricklypearlt.org/2020-trail-projects/)

**The Scratchgravel Hills project represents a real opportunity for a community win for non-motorized recreation of all kinds.**

WEST-CENTRAL MONTANANS  
STEP UP TO THE PLATE

The curveball the COVID pandemic threw at all of us was—in baseball parlance—“nasty.” It would have caused most to step out of the batter’s box, even return to the dugout. But in the world of the Prickly Pear Land Trust, the batters didn’t flinch. They met the challenge, namely the loss of the annual Harvest Moon banquet, PPLT’s biggest fundraiser. Rather than swinging and missing or taking a called strike,

Prickly Pear’s faithful—business sponsors and individuals alike—hit a home run. “I’m really overwhelmed by the appreciation and the outpouring of love for the organization, the staff and the work we do,” said Executive Director, Mary Hollow, when speaking of that response. “Our business partners knew we couldn’t do Harvest Moon and knew how important it is to us.” A major part of the fundraising was meeting a \$150,000 matching grant, contributed by an anonymous donor and PPLT’s Board of Directors. “We met our match.

I was floored,” said Mary. “Each year the community gathers to celebrate the fruits of the year ... our accomplishments,” said Ingrid Lovitt, PPLT’s Development Manager. “This year we couldn’t, but you were there for us. We’re overwhelmed with gratitude. This will carry us into the next year and the ambitious goals we have for protecting land, caring for community and educating future generations.”

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Ashley & Brian Abbott  
Erin Bley  
Michael Cloeren  
Jennifer Colegrove  
Kimberly K. Dale  
David & Jeanette Evraets  
John Fradette  
Tegan Hahn  
John Huskins  
Bob & Cherri Jones  
Jessy Kappelman  
Alex & Molly Kuhn  
Ann McCauley  
& John Torske

Robert Morgan  
& Carl Deitchman  
Anders Newbury  
Colleen Nichols  
Dave & Judy Paton  
Cara Uribe  
Lesly & Kurt Valiton  
John Walden  
Endurance Learning  
Kim Wells  
Kelsey Wiegand  
Morgan Case  
& Tom Woolf



THANK YOU to these amazing businesses and longtime Harvest Moon sponsors who have pledged their support this fall! PPLT is grateful for their partnership as we look forward.

BLUE MOON PRESENTING SPONSOR

PLATINUM SPONSORS

GOLD SPONSORS

SILVER SPONSORS

connecting land  
and people

**PRICKLY PEAR  
LAND TRUST**  
40 W. Lawrence, Suite A  
PO Box 892, Helena MT 59624  
406-442-0490

**STAFF**  
**Mary Hollow**  
Executive Director  
**Rachel Rountree**  
Associate Director  
**Nate Kopp**  
Program & Trails Director  
**Andrea Silverman**  
Conservation Manager  
**Travis Vincent**  
Lands Project Coordinator  
**Sue McNicol**  
Office Manager  
**Ingrid Lovitt**  
Development Manager  
**Blake Sexton**  
Community Conservation  
Coordinator

**BOARD OF DIRECTORS**  
**John Beaver**  
**John Doran**  
**Eliza Frazer**  
**Tyrrell Hibbard**  
**Paula Jacques**  
**Sarah Jaeger**  
**Dennis Milburn**  
**Dawn North**  
**Ed Santos**  
**LeRoy Schramm**  
**Bill Shropshire**  
**John Tietz**  
**Jim Utterback**  
**Erin Woodrow**

Non-profit Org.  
US Postage  
**PAID**  
Helena, MT  
Permit #293

**PRICKLY PEAR  
LAND TRUST**  
40 W. Lawrence, Suite A  
PO Box 892  
Helena MT 59624  
Return service requested



Kevin League

open views

FALL 2020

WHERE THE  
ELK ROOM

SEVENMILE  
RESTORATION  
SURVIVES

WEIGHING IN ON  
SCRATCHGRAVELS