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 area for public access.”

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 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 Mt. 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 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.”

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.”

Two small meadows on the property provide winter range for elk herds.
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, remained green. 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 hospitable to wildlife friends. 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.

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 dog in the Termitie Creek and Sevenmile Creek projects. “Nate has been with PPLT as long as I have,” said his boss, Mary Hallow. “He was a Montana Conservation Corps intern and came to us with 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, Termitie 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 guarantee that performance on how many people we can have outside on the trails having a safe and fun time.”
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” strategy that he initially opposed. PPLT’s ability to draw community support from 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 “What have we done about this.””

Former PPLT Board President, Jim Utterback, who has served for six years as a member of the internal committee, shares Mary’s admiration. “I don’t know what Prickly Pear would have done without him. He never said ‘no’ to a request or a concern of anyone.”

“The Scratchgravels are a well-loved asset,” says Beaver, board president. “Prickly Pear has had a longstanding interest to accommodate all of the Scratchgravels as possible.”

Beaver and Nate Kopp, PPT 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.

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 — chipping away. They proved me— thankfully — wrong.”

“They both fit the organization and the constituency of trail users in our area,” says Beaver.

Weighed in on the recreation 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.”

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

Thank you, LeRoy. The legions of people who have worked with or benefited from LeRoy Schramm know how his contributions to Prickly Pear Land Trust have been anything but "small."
WEST-CENTRAL MONTANANS STEP UP TO THE PLATE

The curveball the COVID pandemic threw at all of us— 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,” 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.”

WHERE THE ELK ROAM
SEVENMILE RESTORATION SURVIVES
WEIGHING IN ON SCRATCHGRAVELS

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.

Contact:
Mary Hollow
Executive Director
(406) 442 -0490

PlANNING & ACTION

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
Ingrid Lovitt
Development Manager
Blake Sexton
Community Conservation Coordinator

Board of Directors:
John Beaver
John Donlan
Eliza Frazer
Tyrrell Hibbard
Paula Jacques
Sarah Jaeger
Dennis Milburn
Dawn North
Ed Santus
LeifRoy Schramm
Bill Sherphire
John Tietz
Jim Utterback
Erik Woodrow

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS
Ashley & Brian Abbott
Erin Bley
Michael Cloeren
Jennifer Colegrove
Kimberly K. Dale
David & Jeanette Evaraets
John Fradette
Tegan Hahn
John Huskins
Bob & Cherri Jones
Jessa Kappelman
Alex & Molly Kuhn
Ann McCausley & John Torske
Robert Morgan
& Carl Detchman
Anders Nasyby
Colleen Nichols
Dave & Judy Patton
Cara Unbe
Lesly & Kurt Valiton
John Walden
Endurance Learning
Kim Wells
Kelely Wingard
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.

Non-profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Helena, MT
Permit #293