

Eliza Wiley



**“The creek has all the things wildlife need, like cover, food, water, and space. A healthy stream begets the other pieces.”**



## AROUND THE NEXT BEND

### CREEK RESTORATIONS BRING PEOPLE AND WILDLIFE TOGETHER



**CHANCES ARE** you know a healthy creek when you see one.

It meanders through a floodplain, curving back and forth like it has all the time in the world. The banks that guide the creek are crowded with willows. During spring run-off, those willows help to absorb the water's energy and protect the banks from erosion. As water leaves the creek and moves across the floodplain, it fills seasonal ponds and sloughs where cattails thrive and birds flock. The cacophony of spring gives way to summer. The creek returns to its banks, and now those willows provide shade and habitat for fish and insects on summer's hottest days. You might glimpse otters diving in a pool or a fox hunting in the marshes. In the fall, birds and bears feast on chokecherries. In the winter, a fresh blanket of snow records the comings and goings of rabbits, voles, deer, moose, elk, and even mountain lions.

Chances are you also know an unhealthy creek when you see one.

That's what Program and Trails Director Nate Kopp saw the first time he visited Sevenmile Creek after Prickly Pear Land Trust purchased a 350-acre parcel of land in the Helena valley.

“Every bank was bare and steep, and it was at least 12 feet from the top of the

bank to the water,” Nate recalls. “The water was cut off from the floodplain. During high flows, there was nowhere for the energy to go except down, so it was downcutting the creekbed and washing tons of soil downstream.”

Sevenmile Creek was basically a ditch. It was one of the top contributors of sediment to Lake Helena, and it was inaccessible to fish and wildlife. Nate oversaw the creek restoration project, which moved it back into the floodplain,

**“We helped a little bit, but Mother Nature is taking the next step.”**

added a half mile of meanders, and stabilized the banks with sand, rocks, and vegetation.

“The creek now has all the things wildlife need, like cover, food, water, and space,” Nate says. “A healthy stream begets the other pieces.”

The hard work has paid off for wildlife. The creek corridor is now home to brook and brown trout and sculpin, 160 bird species, elk, moose, and deer. Land Manager Natalie Yocum continues the restoration by planting more trees, shrubs, and native grasses.

**WHAT WILL IT LOOK LIKE** in a few decades? To glimpse the future, head 10 miles east as the red-winged blackbird flies to Prickly Pear Park. This 240-acre park protects over a mile of Prickly Pear Creek

as it meanders back and forth around a cottonwood grove and through wetlands. Dense willow thickets tower overhead, fish rise in the pools, and sandhill cranes return every spring to nest here. This lush and vibrant waterway is irresistible to wildlife and people. When Prickly Pear Park opens this summer, the public will be able to enjoy this stretch of Prickly Pear Creek for the first time in more than 100 years, thanks to the vision of the East Helena community.

In the 1880s, the American Smelting and Refining Company opened a smelter on the banks of Prickly Pear Creek. Incorporated in 1923, East Helena was a proud company town. The smelter was vital to the town's economy and identity, and ASARCO supported the volunteer fire department, the parent-teacher association, and some city services. In 1984, due to historic lead and arsenic contamination, the smelter was added to the Superfund list. Eventually, the smelter closed, and the ASARCO bankruptcy settlement assigned ownership and responsibility for cleaning and reusing about 2,000 acres to the Montana Environmental Trust Group.

In 2011, East Helena residents began planning how they would use the ASARCO lands after cleanup. One focus area was recreation and habitat. The community wanted a regional trail network, parks with hiking and biking opportunities, access to Prickly Pear Creek and improved fish habitat, and outdoor learning opportunities for their schools. It was a tall order. The smelter operation had turned the creek into a ditch system and used the floodplain as a dumping ground.

Betsy Burns oversaw the clean-up for the Environmental Protection Agency. She remembers standing on the dam with Andy Baur, the former executive director of

**The Sevenmile Creek restoration project added a half mile of meanders, and stabilized the banks with sand, rocks, and vegetation.**



**Prickly Pear Park will open to the public this summer.** Located in East Helena, it includes a 1.5-mile loop trail for hiking and biking. No dogs are allowed to protect the park's wildlife.

PPLT, and trying to envision a healthy creek winding through the floodplain. They would have to move the creek to a bypass channel, tear down the dam, excavate a million cubic yards of material to return the creek to its natural elevation, reconstruct the creek channel, and plant more than 20,000 willow clippings.

It took ten years to complete the project, but Betsy says every day was worth it. Today, Betsy is a PPLT board member who volunteers to teach stream ecology in East Helena's high school with PPLT's education program. Betsy stands on a high point in the park's first trail and grins as she points to where the sandhill cranes nested last year.

“It brings me so much joy to be out here and to see nature in action,” Betsy says. “We helped a little, but Mother Nature is taking the next step. This park is an amazing place for people to learn about nature, to be curious, and to find peace and solace.”

*Sarah Ryan is the communications and development manager at Prickly Pear Land Trust.*



Eliza Wiley





# IN THE BALANCE

RANCHING, WILDLIFE,  
AND NATIONAL SECURITY  
IN THE ELKHORN  
FOOTHILLS

**PRICKLY PEAR LAND TRUST** recently completed a fifth conservation project in Broadwater County that protects ranching, wildlife, and national security. Four prior conservation easements in the county protected the critical shorelines of Crow Creek, Deep Creek, and the Missouri River. They included a healthy portion of cropland plus mallard, moose, wigeon, and whitetail habitat. Our newest project rounds out the habitat mix with the sagebrush steppe typical of the Elkhorn foothills.

The landowners asked Prickly Pear to help them safeguard this nearly 1,000-acre block of their ranch. Our partnership created a lasting agreement that ensures the property remains a cattle ranch with abundant wildlife. This arrangement suits the Army National Guard and Fort Harrison, who supported the project financially because of its proximity to the Limestone Hills training area. The Fort notes that private land conservation ensures critical training can continue while the lands around the Fort stay private and productive.

The family will continue to ranch this land for summer pasture, with three generations helping to

herd the cows back and forth by horseback. The rolling grasslands east of the Elkhorns are adapted to periodic grazing, but it doesn't happen without effort. Each year, the family and a handful of neighbors get on horseback to drive their cows to the foothills. They're almost giddy with the success of their weeds treatment efforts, and they're continually thinking of creative ways to care for the grass, vegetation, and timber on the property.

Wildlife thrives in this landscape. The Elkhorn's cherished elk herd grazes on these native grasslands every winter. Pronghorn are frequent visitors, and even bighorn sheep sometimes stray from their nearby crags to visit the property's seasonal streams and shady aspen groves. While surveying the property, biologist Pete Christensen discovered a nighthawk nest and observed a juvenile Cooper's hawk trying to figure out what to do with a hare it had dispatched but couldn't quite carry. Fortunately, we're confident this easement will carry our ranching heritage and healthy wildlife habitat into the future.

*Travis Vincent is the lands director at Prickly Pear Land Trust.*

Kevin League

## BLAZING TRAILS

REGISTRATION SCHOLARSHIP BREAKS RACE BARRIERS

**SINCE 2000**, our community has gathered every May to celebrate trails and open lands at the Don't Fence Me In Trail Run. With four events, three courses, two mountains, and one big ole party in the park, Don't Fence Me In is a beloved celebration of the Happy Trails lifestyle. This year, we're opening our race arms wide with a scholarship program covering registration costs for 10 participants.

Rebecca Harbage has crossed the finish line eight times because she loves giving back to Helena's trails. When Harbage saw the registration scholarship announcement online, she immediately gave a gift to support the program.

"When I first moved to Helena, I was in the Americorps program, and the cost of a race entry was a big concern for me," Harbage recalls. "If I can help take that concern away and bring more people into the community, that's awesome."

We couldn't agree more! We want everyone to enjoy this trail system and the opportunities it provides for fun, health, and connection. Residents of Lewis and Clark, Jefferson, Broadwater, and Powell counties are encouraged to apply if financial barriers or concerns would prevent them from participating. Apply by April 30 at [bit.ly/DFMIscholarship](https://bit.ly/DFMIscholarship).

### VOLUNTEERS BRING THE MAGIC

Packet pick-up, course guard, water station, first aid station, stop-and-go helper—these are just a handful of the more than 100 volunteer jobs that make race day possible. Volunteers help with logistics, keep our runners and walkers safe, and bring the love that makes Don't Fence Me In so magical. Visit our website to sign up for a volunteer spot today!



**REGISTER NOW FOR THE 30K, 12K, 5K RACES OR THE 5K DOG WALK**

[bit.ly/dfmi](https://bit.ly/dfmi)

Keith Jackson, Last Chance Photography



# GROWING TOGETHER

## NEW TRAILS, PARKS, AND PARTNERSHIPS

**SPRING IS A SEASON OF GROWTH**, and Prickly Pear Land Trust is no exception. As the pasqueflowers bloom on Mount Helena, keep an eye out for new faces and new places.

"Prickly Pear Land Trust started almost 30 years ago as a bootstrap organization where everyone wore multiple hats. We still have that all-hands-on-deck mindset, but we've matured with the community," Associate Director Rachel Rountree says. "The demand for trails, parks, and open space continues to grow, so we're adding the best and brightest to our team."

That demand came in the form of three landmark opportunities. First, we're opening a new park and building trails and connectivity in East Helena. Second, we have a new cooperative agreement with Fort Harrison, which supports private land protection from the Helena valley to Townsend. Third, we're collaborating with the Forest Service on the most extensive trail project in the history of the South Hills. (Stay tuned for more information on that project.)

Prickly Pear Land Trust started building trails and protecting open space in Helena in 1995. Almost 30 years later, we're working on parks, trails, conservation easements, and educational programs in a region about the same size as New Jersey.

**"We want to give as many people as possible access to nature and safe places to hike, bike, and wonder. And hopefully, we'll inspire future conservation leaders along the way."**

"We needed more boots on the ground, not just to accomplish the work but also to be ambassadors in the community," says Executive Director Mary Hollow. "This work is only possible if everyone knows it and supports it to the extent they can."

Our success on the ground has led to large-scale projects and a faster pace, as well as funding opportunities that make growth sustainable. New sources support four positions. We are grateful to AmeriCorps, the Forest Service, the M.J. Murdoch Charitable Trust, and other public and private partners for funding positions that support public access,

communications, and education.

Whether Lands Manager Natalie Yocum is teaching students about native plants, Trails Coordinator Collin Ahlemeier is showing volunteers how to retread a trail, or

Content Creator Emily Winn is interviewing a veteran at Tenmile Creek Park, every Prickly Pear staff member is an ambassador for conservation.

"At the end of the day, we want to give as many people as possible access to nature and safe places to hike, bike, and wonder," Rachel says. "And hopefully, we'll inspire future conservation leaders along the way."

—Sarah Ryan

## FIRESIDE CHATS IGNITE CURIOSITY AND COMMUNITY

**WHO KNEW** a little electric fireplace could ignite a community of lifelong learners?

In 2019, Prickly Pear Land Trust launched an environmental education program in response to community demand for outdoor learning experiences. The program focused on high school students, but it quickly became evident that the appetite for learning extended far beyond the classroom.

The Fireside Chat initiative emerged from this realization. Education Coordinator Audra Shropshire and Sue Nichol, our former volunteer coordinator, dreamed of using adult education to creatively connect land and people. Their vision was simple: gather experts and community members for relaxed discussions on topics like geology, ecology, and local history. "There's a thirst for learning in this community," Audra says.

She started recruiting speakers for a monthly talk and bought an electric fireplace to foster a cozy atmosphere. Last November, hydrologist Mike Roberts spoke to about 20 attendees at the first Fireside Chat. Since then, our Fireside Chats have thrived. In March, more than 100 people showed up to learn about new parks and trails in East Helena from board member Betsy Burns.

Environmental consultant Taylor Spiegelberg presented on the geology and history of our favorite landmarks, and he baked bread! "I was excited to see how many people in the community were interested in geology and science as a whole," Taylor says. "It feels like our community is full of people who enjoy learning more about their natural environment and how they interact with it."



**Executive Director Mary Hollow kicks off a Fireside Chat about new parks and trails in East Helena.**

Program and Trails Director Nate Kopp advocates for growing the Fireside Chat program because our mission extends beyond conservation to education and community empowerment. "We are aiming for six chats next year," Nate says. To make this program accessible to everyone in our community, we'll livestream future Fireside Chats and share recordings online.

We invite you to join us in shaping the future of Fireside Chats. Do you have ideas or expertise to share when we gather around the fireside in the fall? Let us know! Together, we can empower our community with the knowledge and passion to protect our land and inspire future generations.

Emily Winn is the content creator at Prickly Pear Land Trust.



Keith Jackson, Last Chance Photography

### • Collin Ahlemeier, Trails Coordinator

Collin will lead our on-the-ground trail program by coordinating and planning trail projects with partner agencies like the Forest Service. You might meet Collin leading a volunteer trail crew or overseeing a Montana Conservation Corps crew in the South Hills. Collin brings a wealth of stewardship experience to our team, including conservation corps and national park hitches.

### • Tim Lawrence, Trails and Parks Manager

Tim joined the Prickly Pear team four years ago, but he's moving into a new role as the on-the-ground leader of the trails and parks team during our biggest trail season ever. Tim beams when he talks about successful trail projects like the Barking Dog and TR reroutes. He also believes that trail work is an opportunity for people from different generations and walks of life to get to know each other. Tim will work closely with Collin and Lucas to make our parks and trails more accessible and more fun for everyone.

### • Lucas Orth, Parks Coordinator

Lucas is a jack-of-all-trades who enjoys a deep dive into new topics. From wildland firefighting to grasslands management and automotive tech, Lucas loves to research, learn, and do, which makes him a great fit for his new role as a Happy Trails ambassador. He'll spend a lot of time at Tenmile Creek Park and the new parks in East Helena. Lucas enjoys running, mountain biking, dirt biking, and snowmobiling on public lands.

### • Sarah Ryan, Communications and Development Manager

Sarah worked and volunteered in higher education and nonprofits in Colorado for twenty years. She moved to Helena a few years ago and worked for Wild Montana before joining the Prickly Pear team. She loves storytelling and fundraising for a good cause, from disability and LGBTQ rights to public lands and clean water. Sarah will work closely with the whole team to grow our community of friends, volunteers, and supporters.

### • Travis Vincent, Lands Director

Travis Vincent, a six-year veteran of our lands team, is joining PPLT's leadership team as lands director. He enjoys working with local landowners to protect our most cherished properties, like the iconic Canyon Cattle land on the Missouri and the Potter Ranch. The variety and foresight of PPLT projects are a real driver for Vincent and the whole organization. The lands program works on conservation easements that support trails and hunting, safeguard water and farmlands in Broadwater County, and support traditional Indigenous land use.

### • Emily Winn, Content Creator

Emily grew up in Helena and loves the outdoors. After living in Bozeman and Spokane, she's thrilled to be back in her hometown and helping to tell PPLT's story. Emily loves graphic design, photography, social media, and working with volunteers. The outdoors is her happy place, whether camping, hiking, kayaking, or walking her dog, Arlo.

### • Natalie Yocum, Lands Manager

Natalie is a Big Sky Watershed Corps member and a future conservation leader with a homegrown passion for Montana's ecology. She grew up in Arlee, Montana, and spent summers kayaking and foraging in Polebridge. Natalie graduated from Carroll College with an environmental science degree and worked for Gardenwerks Flower Farm, Montana Conservation Corps, and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. She loves creating spaces for the community to enjoy and respect the outdoors.



**WELCOME NEW MEMBERS**

Scott & Loretta Andrews  
Allan Baris & Karen Watts  
Mikael Bedell  
Gary Bacon  
Jimmy Jamison  
Nathan Phillips  
Lawrence Rowan  
Jacy Suenram  
Philip & Jayme Vinton



**SAVE THESE DATES!**

**Earth Day Willow Planting**

Monday, April 22

**Don't Fence Me In**

Saturday, May 11

**Volunteer Trail Nights**

Tuesday, April 16  
Tuesday, May 14  
Saturday, June 1  
Tuesday, June 18  
Tuesday, July 16  
Tuesday, Sept 17

**Harvest Moon**

Saturday, September 28

**EARTH DAY APRIL 22**

Learn about stream restoration by replanting willow cuttings at Sevenmile Creek. Our work will help maintain the integrity of the stream banks and prevent erosion. Volunteer spots are limited. Sign up on our website: [pricklypearlt.org/events/volunteer](http://pricklypearlt.org/events/volunteer)

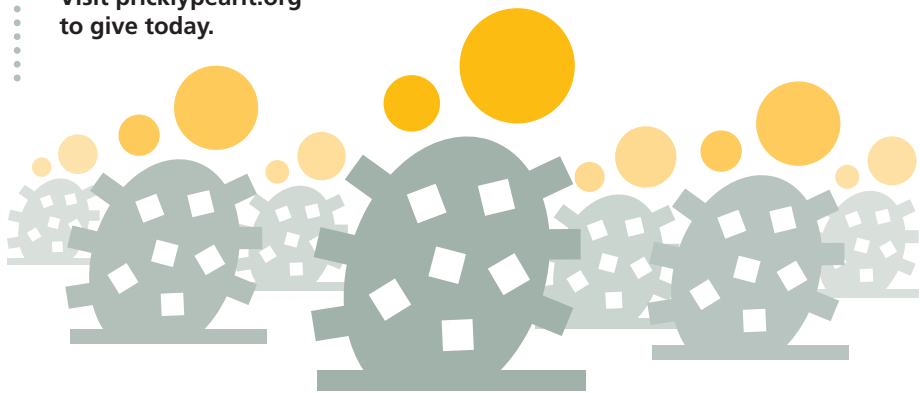
**JOIN THE CACTUS CLUB MONTHLY GIVING PROGRAM!**

Support our work with a recurring monthly donation. Your commitment helps ensure our community can protect and steward the breathtaking landscapes, waterways, wildlife habitats, recreational spaces, and agricultural heritage of west-central Montana. No gift is too small to make a big impact.



And guess what? Protecting the places you love has never been so rewarding! Cactus Club memberships start at just \$5 per month, with succulent perks kicking in at \$10 per month.

Visit [pricklypearlt.org](http://pricklypearlt.org) to give today.



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Western Gold Bar

connecting land and people

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- Collin Ahlemeier**  
Trails Coordinator
- Sherry Berrin**  
Stewardship Manager
- Rebecca Dudek**  
Associate Development Director
- Mary Hollow**  
Executive Director
- Nate Kopp**  
Program and Trails Director
- Tim Lawrence**  
Trails and Parks Manager
- Kevin League**  
Lands Project Manager
- Lucas Orth**  
Parks Coordinator
- Emmett Purcell**  
Trails Assistant
- Rachel Rountree**  
Associate Director
- Sarah Ryan**  
Communications and Development Manager
- Renee Schulte**  
Bookkeeper
- Audra Shropshire**  
Education Coordinator
- Travis Vincent**  
Lands Director
- Emily Winn**  
Content Creator
- Natalie Yocum**  
Lands Manager  
Big Sky Watershed Corps Member

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SPRING 2024

open views



EDUCATION ON FIRE

DON'T FENCE ME IN SCHOLARSHIP

NEW FACES AND PLACES IN THE PRICKLY PEAR FAMILY



**A TALE OF TWO CREEKS**