

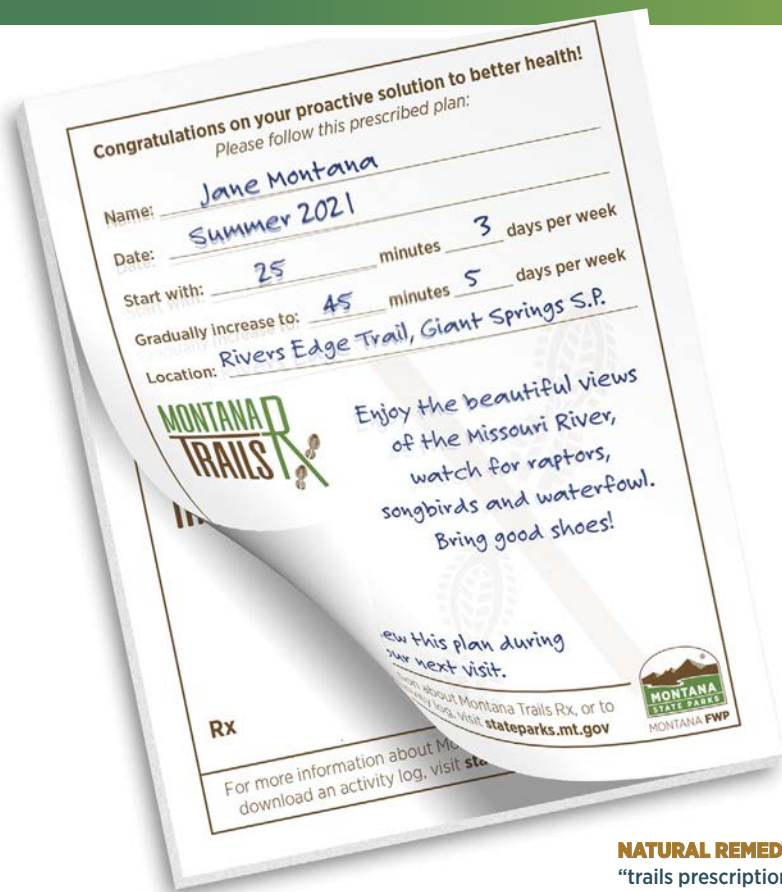
A hiker stands on the edge of a layered rock cliff, looking out over a vast valley at sunset. The sky is filled with dramatic, colorful clouds in shades of purple, orange, and blue. The valley below is a mix of green grass and brown earth, with distant mountains visible on the horizon.

A Healthy Dose of Nature

Hiking, fishing, bird watching, and otherwise enjoying Montana's parks, trails, and other public lands can improve our physical and mental well-being. **By Julie Lue**

FEELING GREAT. A hiker takes in the stunning sunset view from the bluff at First Peoples Buffalo Jump State Park.

PHOTO BY ANDY AUSTIN



NATURAL REMEDY FWP offers these “trails prescription” pads to doctors and physical therapists to prescribe outdoor exercise to their patients.

I haven’t brought my fly rod, but a rising trout still draws me to the water on the south side of an island in the Clark Fork River. Upstream, a family of eared grebes paddles in the current. Downstream, an osprey chirps loudly from its perch on a dead branch, then takes flight and circles overhead. Several cottonwoods lie across the bank, their trunks gnawed through by beavers. The air is filled with the rush and gurgle of the river, and the beeping of what sounds like a thousand nuthatches in the riparian forest behind me. I can smell the damp sand beneath my feet, the wild mint growing between the cobbles.

Except for the view over my left shoulder—distant buildings and a jet rising steeply after takeoff—you’d never guess I’m just a short drive and a short walk from one of Missoula’s busiest commercial strips.

Today I’ve taken a break from my errands to explore Council Grove State Park, site of the signing of the 1855 Hellgate Treaty between the Salish, Kootenai, and Kalispel tribes and the federal government. The park is a peaceful place to walk among old-growth ponderosas and reflect on how, 166 years ago, the three tribes reluctantly ceded ownership of most of their homeland while retaining key rights for cultural and subsistence uses of these lands.



Hiking at Council Grove State Park along the Clark Fork River. It’s one of dozens of Montana state parks accessible for hiking or just sitting along a stream or lake listening to the water.

It also provides an opportunity for exercise, fresh air, and a connection with the natural world—something appreciated not only by walkers, bird watchers, and other recreational users, but also by scientists and healthcare providers. A growing body of research supports what those who love the natural world have suspected all along:

Spending time in nature and participating in outdoor activities is good for our physical and mental health.

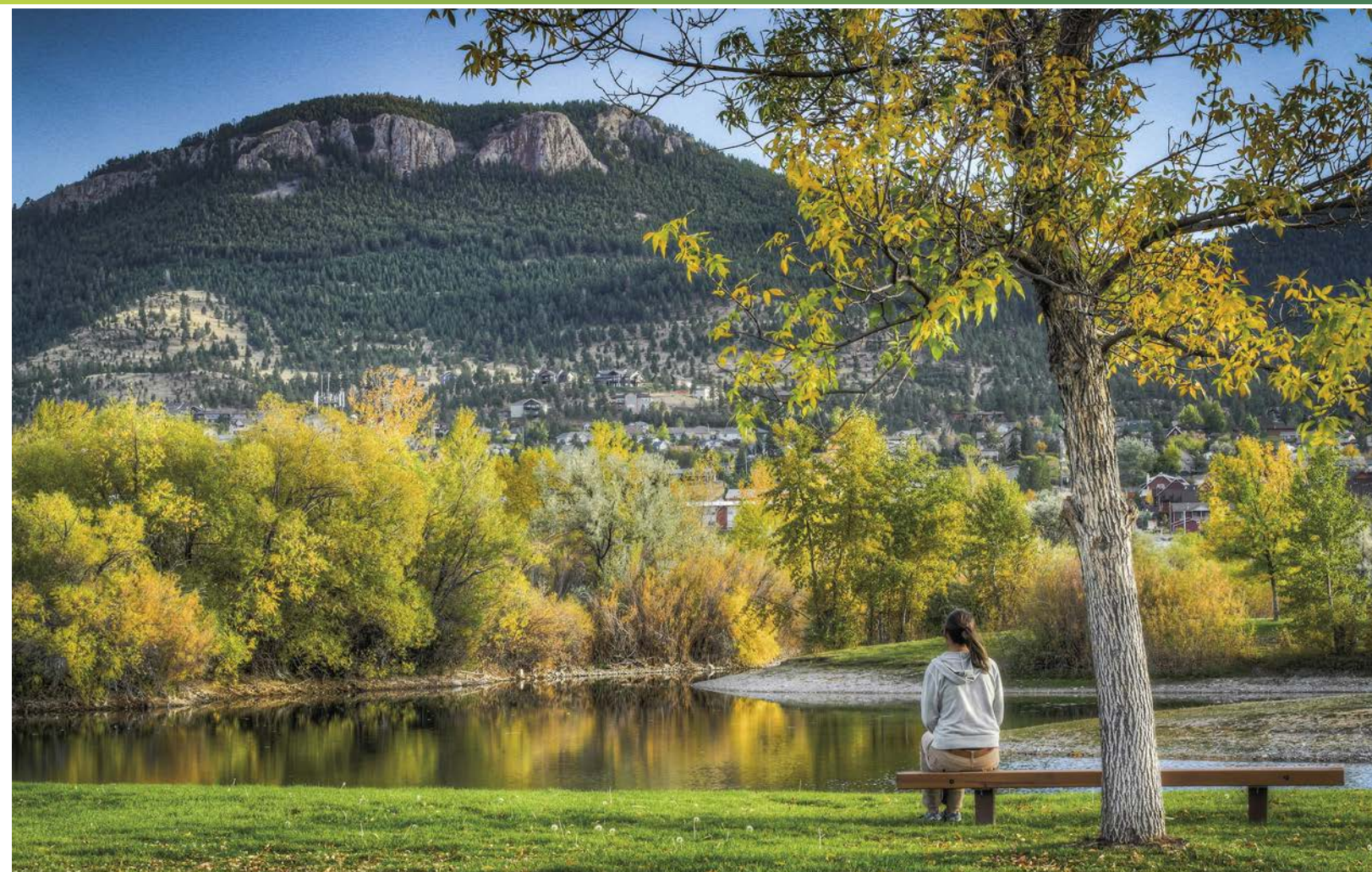
Healthier outside

For decades, health officials have recommended exercise to help build strong bodies and healthy hearts, and many Montanans heed the call. Montana ranks “near the top of the heap” compared to other states regarding physical activity and obesity, according to Dr. Aaron Wernham, a family physician and CEO of the Montana Healthcare Foundation in Bozeman. But we’re still “not where we want to be,” Wernham says. According to Montana’s Department of Health and Human Services, more than 60 percent of Montana adults live with chronic diseases, for which lack of physical activity is a risk factor.

The state’s healthcare picture includes both good and bad news. Although Montana has a robust network of primary care, hospital care, and behavioral health centers, according to Wernham, much of the state suffers shortages of healthcare staff and facilities, requiring many rural residents to drive long distances to see providers.

Yet medical facilities alone can’t ensure good health, Wernham says. “We are sometimes conditioned to think that access to health care makes you healthy, but having

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS; KEVIN LEAGUE; ANDY AUSTIN; ANDY AUSTIN



Many Montanans already enjoy the benefits, even if unintentionally, of “forest bathing” or “forest therapy.” Known as *shinrin-yoku* in Japan, this practice involves walking or relaxing in the woods while engaging all the senses.



Spring Meadow Lake State Park, top, and Frenchtown Lake State Park, above.

access to activities that keep you healthy is what makes you healthy. Our health has more to do with how we live our lives.”

And if our lives include plenty of activities in nature, even better. Wernham says access to parks and open space is associated with lower rates of diabetes, high blood pressure, depression, and anxiety. “There’s enough [research] to convince me as a medical professional that the benefits are significant for physical and mental health.”

Montana State Parks chief Beth Shumate says hundreds of studies affirm this connection between nature and health. “There’s so much research out there showing that we can decrease the burden of chronic disease with time spent outdoors,” she says. Shumate, who previously coordinated the Montana State Parks Trails Program and before that worked in public health at Mayo Clinic in

Minnesota, believes that lands managed by FWP play an important role in keeping Montanans healthy. “Right now, we talk about our state parks, wildlife management areas, and fishing access sites in terms of recreation, access, stewardship, education, and, most recently, value to local economies,” Shumate says. “But we should also add the enormous value these properties provide for personal and public health, available to people at all income levels.”

Natural remedies

Many people already use these areas regularly for health reasons, often walking or hiking on trails. Shumate says health benefits also come from outdoor activities not traditionally viewed as exercise, like camping,

Julie Lue is a writer in Florence.

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HEALTH ADVOCATE Beth Shumate unwinds after work at Spring Meadow Lake State Park. The Montana State Parks chief believes state parks act as “health centers” that provide accessible sites where people can de-stress, build strength, and rejuvenate.

wildlife viewing, fishing, and snowmobiling (which, according to researchers at the University of Guelph in Ontario, qualifies as a moderate-intensity activity). “There’s exercise just in loading and unloading your snowmobile from the trailer, or getting a walleye boat in and out of the water,” Shumate says. “It’s movement, it’s activity, and it’s all good for you.”

What’s more, time spent outdoors appears to have what health specialists call a “dose curve.” Researchers have learned that, for instance, 5 minutes outside is beneficial, “but 30 minutes to an hour is *really* beneficial, especially for helping reduce anxiety and depression and increase vitality and creativity,” Shumate says.

Body and mind

Benefits of outdoor recreation in nature extend beyond exertion alone—perhaps due to “biophilia,” a term used by Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson to describe our “innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes.”

Walking along a busy street or on a gym treadmill doesn’t make us feel as good as strolling through a forest or even a wooded urban park. According to researchers with the Walking Green Project (a joint effort by Northwestern University and the University of Minnesota), “activity in greenspace yields greater improvements in mental health than does activity completed indoors or in a built urban environment.”



WHEELING FOR WELLNESS A young mountain biker followed by her dad heads down the Whitefish Trail, one of several community-supported trail systems across Montana.

bathing” or “forest therapy.” Known as *shinrin-yoku* in Japan, this practice involves walking or relaxing in the woods while engaging all the senses. It’s not unlike my morning at Council Grove, or what you might experience when out hiking, fishing, mountain biking, or hunting. You see the sunlight filtering through the trees, hear the sound of water, feel the wind on your face, and smell the fresh air. Forest therapy has been shown to reduce stress and improve mood and sleep. There is also evidence that phytoncides—volatile organic compounds released into the air by trees—don’t just make forests smell good, they also boost our immune systems.

But you don’t need a forest for a healthy nature break. Spend time along a river, in a prairie, or on a lake or mountain. And the places that make the biggest difference are probably those close and convenient enough to become part of your everyday life. They may even be right where you live.

Local trails

Most Montana major municipalities—including Billings, Bozeman, Butte, Helena, Missoula, Great Falls, and Whitefish—have extensive paved and natural trail systems available for people to take in a regular dose of “vitamin N” (nature). Then there’s

TOP TO BOTTOM: THOM BRIDGE; STEVEN GNAM



Studies show that time spent in nature is linked to lower blood pressure and decreased activity in a part of our brains linked to rumination, or excessive worry. It can also improve our sense of well-being.

Montana’s state parks, many within city limits or a short drive from communities across the state.

State parks offer so many health benefits that Shumate thinks people should start considering them as “health centers.” Though state parks are diverse, ranging from primitive sites to amenity-rich tourism hot spots, all offer visitors the chance to get outside and get moving—whether by walking, swimming, mountain biking, or kayaking. “We have the infrastructure of trails, signs, restrooms, parking, and all other parts of the ‘built environment’ that make trail use easy and convenient for visitors,” Shumate says. And many people make state parks part of their regular routine.

TOP TO BOTTOM: ANDY AUSTIN; SHUTTERSTOCK

At Lone Pine State Park near Kalispell, known for its spectacular views of the Flathead Valley, local hikers regularly traverse parts or all of the 7.5-mile trail system, informing park manager Brian Schwartz of any downed trees or other problems they encounter. Murray Jewett, who describes himself as “the youngest 64-year-old you’re ever going to meet,” walks there at 5:30 every morning with his wife, Melinda Cole, and their two dogs. During winter they keep going with the help of headlamps, reflective vests, and traction devices. Jewett says these walks give him “a daily dose of exercise and fresh air that acts as my sunlight substitute” on dark days. Besides the physical advantages, walking in the park is a “huge destressor,” he

YEAR-ROUND OUTDOOR ACTIVITY

Above: Swimmers rejuvenate at Yellow Bay State Park on Flathead Lake. Below: New research shows that snowmobiling and power boating, not usually considered exercise, provide health benefits by getting people moving outdoors.



adds. “There’s nothing more meditative than a walk in the woods.”

Sunnie Paulson, who has Type 1 diabetes and cares for her grandchildren during the



Montana's largest state park serves as a destination for travelers attracted by paleontology and beautifully tinted badlands formations. Makoshika also provides an everyday escape for residents of Glendive, just minutes away.

GOOD LANDS Hikers take in a healthy prescription of stunning scenery on the Cap Rock Trail at Makoshika.



GETTING THEIR DAILY DOSE Above: Paddleboarders cross Brush Lake, Montana's easternmost state park, located about 65 miles north of Sydney. Top right: Walking the shoreline at Ackley Lake State Park, another little-known park, located east of Lewistown.



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day, walks in Lone Pine State Park nearly every morning, both for the exercise but also because "sometimes that's the only time I get out of the house," she says. "Since we moved here and we found this park, it has been my place."

Big backyard

On the other end of the state, Montana's largest state park, Makoshika, is a destination for travelers attracted by paleontology and beautifully tinted badlands formations. It also provides an everyday escape for residents of Glendive, just minutes away. Park manager Chris Dantic says Makoshika's almost 20 miles of trails draw regular hikers as well as local high school and community college cross-country teams.

Glendive dentist Luke Gambee visits Makoshika three or four times a week, often biking or running there after work. "If I squeeze in at least a quick loop before I go home, I feel good," he says. He and his wife Meghann and their five children often visit the park together to bike, hike, or just play. "We have a small backyard, but it feels big because the park is right there," says Gambee, who likens the family's time in the park to "an

emotional and mental vitamin supplement." Montana State Parks and Recreation Board member Kathy McLane, who lives on a large ranch near Makoshika, says that even with 20,000 acres of their own rangeland to explore, she and her family often visit the park. McLane, honored as a "community champion" by the Dawson County Healthy Communities Coalition, believes that people "need to breathe air that hasn't been breathed

yet; that's important for our health." McLane, an avid hiker and horseback rider, also likes to take her 95-year-old mother riding in a side-by-side utility vehicle. "It makes her feel like she's a part of the world," McLane says.

A dose of nature Lake Elmo State Park, which protects 123 acres of water and greenspace in the center

TOWN TONIC Located within the Billings city limits, Lake Elmo State Park's trails and lake are an easily accessible nature fix for the urban area's 110,000 residents.



TOP TO BOTTOM: DIANE BROWDER; ANDY AUSTIN

of Billings, is another natural "health club" for local residents. In 2020 the park received about 230,000 visitors, including many like Diane Svee, who walks the crushed gravel trail around the lake once or twice a week. During the initial pandemic stay-at-home order, "it made all the difference in my mental health to be able to go outside," she says.

On a typical summer day, the park is in use from opening time at 5 a.m. until closing at 10 p.m. Runners head out early with their dogs on the 1.4-mile loop trail. As the day warms, the park attracts even more runners, families with small children, kayakers and paddleboarders, swimmers, and, at dusk, sunset-watchers.

FWP south-central region park manager Terri Walters hopes to connect additional Billings residents with Lake

PET SMART Taking dogs for a walk, like on the Whitefish Trail outside of Whitefish, can be just as healthy for pet owners as it is for their pets.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ANDY AUSTIN; ANDY AUSTIN; WHITEFISH LEGACY PARTNERS

Elmo State Park through FWP's "Prescription Trails" Program, which encourages healthcare providers to "prescribe" trail use at Lake Elmo. Sometimes people don't know where to go, Walters says, but trails prescriptions identify "a place that is very accessible and safe within city limits where they can recreate and exercise." This low-key program requires only trail signs, a brochure, prescription pads (see page 24), and outreach—from Walters, physical therapists, and even veterinarians.

A unique element of the FWP program is asking veterinarians to consider prescribing Lake Elmo's trail for dogs that need more exercise, benefiting both pets and owners. "Many people are much more willing to do things for their dog than they are for themselves," Walters says.

Walters recognizes the importance of the Lake Elmo trail to the surrounding community and hopes grants can help FWP eventually pave the 1.4-mile loop. She also aims to establish prescription trails at nearby Cooney and Plenty Coups state parks.

Not surprisingly, Shumate would like to expand the prescription trails concept even further to include more state parks, as well as fishing access sites, wildlife management areas, and community-owned urban trails. "As healthy as many people are in Montana, we still face unhealthy rates of heart disease, diabetes, depression, obesity, and suicide," she says. "Just getting outdoors can be a big part of preventing these health problems." 🐾