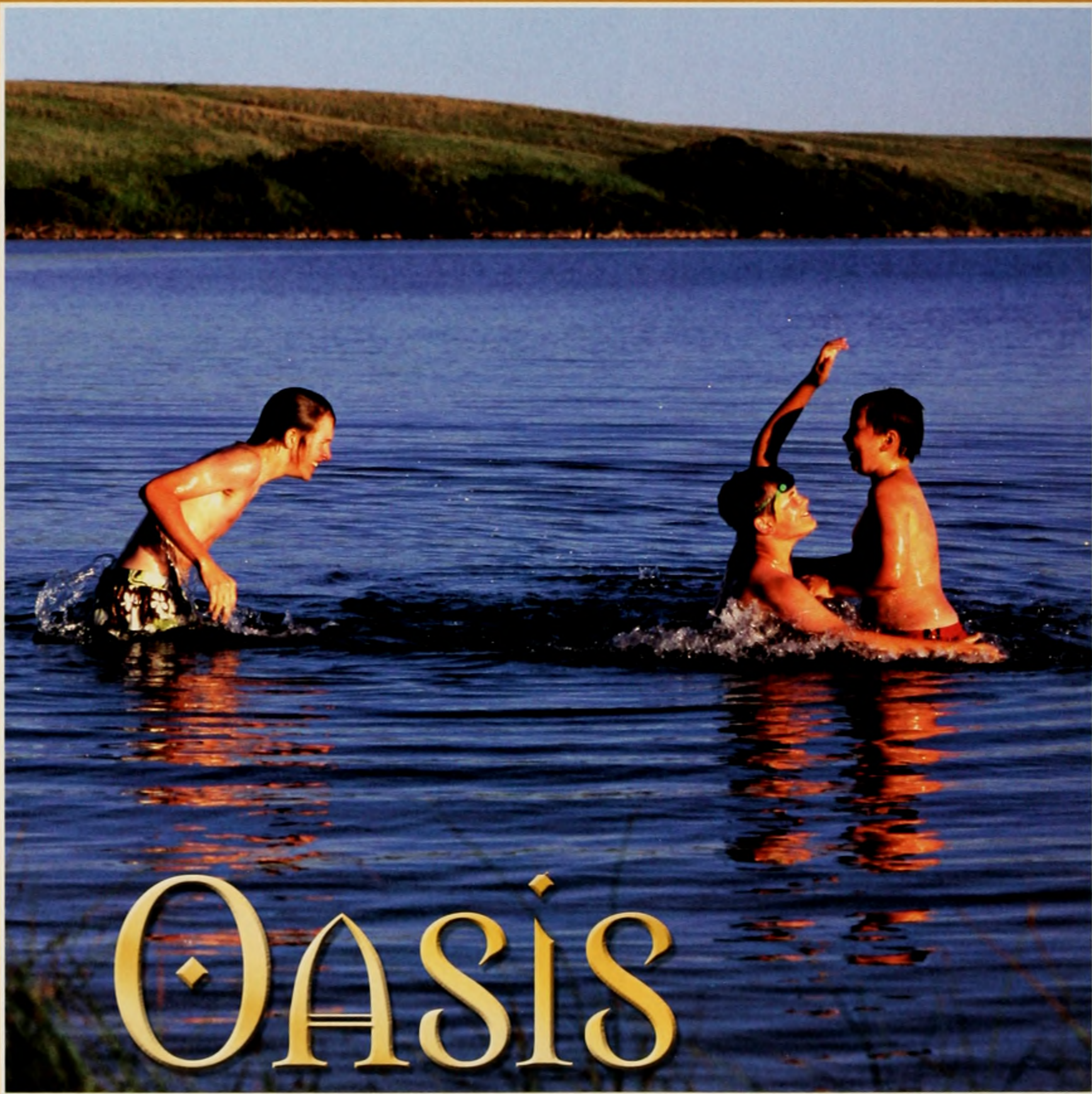


COOL AND CLEAR WATER, SANDY BEACHES, PICNIC FACILITIES, AND MORE—THE NEW BRUSH LAKE STATE PARK MAY BE THE GREATEST THING TO HIT NORTHEASTERN MONTANA SINCE THE INVENTION OF AIR CONDITIONING



OASIS

ON THE PRAIRIE



**F**rom the air, Brush Lake looks like a piece of turquoise tossed on a sand dune.

The intense blue of the lake is entirely out of place in the caramel-colored monotony of wheat stubble that marches to all horizons in this northeastern corner of Montana.

From the ground, 280-acre Brush Lake is no less striking. In an area of the state where the glaciated landscape is pocked with shallow, alkaline prairie potholes, Brush is a deep, clear lake with white, sandy beaches surrounded by grass fields and linear stands of spring wheat.

Recently Brush Lake became Montana's 50th state park (and the only one in the state's northeastern region), providing public access to what Elliott Jensen of nearby Dagmar calls "Montana's best swimming hole east of the mountains."

Jensen likely knows this swimming hole better than anyone. His family once owned the entire lake and last year sold the northern two-thirds to Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks to develop as a state park. The Jensens have long worked to sell the property to a public agency with the hope the site would be preserved for public use.

### **TWO BITS A SUIT**

Jensen's first paying job was renting towels and bathing suits to swimmers in the 1930s who flocked to Brush Lake on summer afternoons. They came from prairie homesteads and clapboard communities across northeastern Montana during a time when spare change and recreation were luxuries few families could afford. Still, Jensen can recall collecting "two bits" for a swimming

**BY ANDREW MCKEAN**  
**PHOTOS BY MATT LONG**

## LOCAL HOT SPOT

In the early 1900s, Brush Lake rocked. Model Ts and dusty pickups filled the parking area as local farmers gathered to swim, eat, dance, and (during Prohibition) partake in refreshments smuggled from Canada. Today, local landowner Elliott Jensen (below), of nearby Dagmar,



points to a site on the lake that once held open-air revivals, picnics, baseball games, and bake sales—and may do so again.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ELLIOTT JENSEN

**“IN THE PAST, BRUSH LAKE WAS THE PLACE FOR PEOPLE TO GET TOGETHER. I HOPE IT WILL ONCE AGAIN BE SUCH A PLACE.” —ELLIOTT JENSEN**

suit and use of a tiny changing room in a bathhouse on the shore of the lake, which is located in a fold of the prairie about 4 miles east of Dagmar and just 2 miles from the North Dakota state line.

“On summer weekends, there would be hundreds of people out here swimming and boating and having picnics,” says Jensen. “Brush Lake was where people from different communities gathered. There were no good roads back then, just prairie trails, but you’d have people driving 75 miles—three hours each way—from as far away as Scobey just to swim and get together.”

The initial attractions of Brush Lake, says Jensen, were its natural assets. More than 60 feet deep and fed by cold springs, the lake stays cool and clear all summer. Unlike the nearby pothole lakes, it doesn’t choke with algae or stink of sulphur (locally called “soda”) and stagnant water. Because it’s located in a depression of the prairie, Brush Lake is partially sheltered from the winds that strafe the surrounding hilltops and ridges. Ringing the shore, the chokecherry and buffaloberry bushes that gave the lake its name provide shade and wild fruit. In

*Andrew McKean is the FWP regional information and education officer in Glasgow. Photographer Matt Long lives in Livingston.*

the early 1900s prairie homesteaders, many of them first-generation Scandinavian immigrants, found in Brush Lake a gathering place that reminded them of the neighborhood lakes left behind in northern Europe. They got together for open-air revivals, picnics, baseball games, bake sales, and fiery political debates (at the time, far northeastern Montana was strongly influenced by the socialist prairie populism movement.)

It didn’t take long for the lake to become a hotspot for nighttime entertainment, too. A huge dance hall was thrown up on the south shore of the lake in 1920. Bootleggers from nearby farmhouses lubricated the social scene with homemade beer and gin smuggled across the Canadian border, just 25 miles to the north.

As many homesteaders went broke and the remaining farms consolidated, the population of northeastern Montana declined, on average about 10 percent for every decade after 1920. Brush Lake’s refreshingly cool swimming water continued to draw some visitors. But use of the lake and its facilities (lakeside cabins, a small restaurant, and a group-use pavilion) was limited mainly to summer Bible camps run by a local church, 4-H clubs, and Boy Scout troops. After the church sold the property, public use declined further.

Several groups tried to buy the lake for public use, but none of them were willing to assume the liability risks, says Doug Smith, a Brush Lake booster who grew up nearby on his family’s farm.

“Brush Lake is a unique gem,” says Smith, a local county planner. “It’s been a community gathering place for a century, and many of us felt it should be placed in the public domain. But we didn’t have a tool to do that until Fish, Wildlife & Parks came onto the scene.”

## FINALLY, A PARK

For years Woody Baxter, FWP’s state parks manager for northeastern Montana, was in charge of a region with no state parks but plenty of natural, recreational, and cultural assets. In 2001, he convened a volunteer search committee to identify areas suitable as state parks in the northeastern region. Smith was one of a dozen members of the committee, and he helped boost Brush Lake from one of 25 properties under consideration to the group’s top pick.

The lake’s prospects were further enhanced by a legislative resolution in 2003, sponsored by another local resident, Montana Senator Linda Nelson. Her resolution mandated Brush Lake as FWP’s first state park in the northeastern region.

Why all the passion and support for a remote prairie lake nearly in North Dakota?

“There just aren’t many 60-foot-deep, spring-fed lakes in eastern Montana,” says Smith, who has long studied the unique geological treasure. “From a hydraulic perspective, Brush Lake is more like Yellowstone National Park’s Morning Glory Pool than anything. Its source is a huge spring that emanates from an underground aquifer. There is no inlet or outlet, so water leaves the lake either through evaporation or by [seeping] into adjacent White Lake. The evaporation concentrates minerals in the lake, so it’s high in the sorts of mineral salts—manganese, calcium carbonate, and sodium sulfate—often found in healing hot springs.”

The minerals make Brush Lake inhospitable to fish, which suffocate from calcium deposits on their gills.

“Often, on lakes this size, we see conflicts between anglers and other water recreation-



**STRANGE PLACE, INDEED** Sixty feet deep and refreshingly cool even in midsummer, Brush Lake differs remarkably from the tepid, shallow potholes in most of northeastern Montana. State park designation has reopened the lake to public use so people may enjoy the water, see the colorful mineral deposits that form on shore, and watch kingbirds and other wildlife.



ists, but that won't be a problem here because of the lack of a fishery," says Baxter.

"I think the park will become a destination for divers," he adds. "Unlike most waters in eastern Montana, Brush Lake stays clear throughout the summer."

Divers may even discover clues to the area's geologic history on the lake bottom. Thousands of years ago, the area surrounding Brush Lake was the ancestral valley of the Missouri River. The great river flowed north into Hudson Bay before a series of glaciers scoured the prairie and pushed the Missouri south to its current route. Roughly 13,000 years ago, one of the last glaciers receded and left behind, imbedded on the plain, a chunk of ice the size of a shopping mall. As the ice melted, it formed a bowl that became Brush Lake. In time, a spruce forest grew around the lake. The trees eventually fell into the water, drifted to the bottom, and were covered by thousands of years of wind-blown pollen and dust. Smith says researchers studying core samples have de-

tected spruce trees dating back thousands of years at the base of the lake's silt bottom.

### **PUBLIC AMENITY**

While scientists study Brush Lake's fascinating past, citizen advocates such as Smith work to preserve its future. "There is almost no public land in this corner of Montana," he says. "If you don't have public land, it's hard to develop public amenities. And without amenities, it's hard to reverse our depopulation trend. I'm not saying Brush Lake State Park is the cure for economic development in this part of the state, but it's a good start."

He may be right. According to Larry Swanson, a University of Montana economist, western Montana's recent population explosion and resulting economic growth are partly due to that region's abundant public lands and waters. Many people in eastern Montana are now looking at their plentiful natural resources and thinking about how public lands and waters might

attract newcomers or convince existing residents to stay. Brush Lake may become one of many amenities—including grand vistas, wildlife recreation, and safe surroundings—that keep people from leaving the economically depressed northeastern region.

“Though we definitely hope to attract visitors from all over, we expect the park will be mainly used by folks from around northeastern Montana and western North Dakota who have relatively few nearby public parks,” says Baxter. “I think it will be attractive for afternoon swimming and weekend camp-outs, and for people with boats who don’t want to drive to Fort Peck Lake. In the fall, I expect to see bird hunters from throughout the state camping there.”

Currently, FWP owns only the northern portion of Brush Lake. The southern part is owned by a private trust. Baxter says FWP hopes to eventually have the opportunity to acquire the rest of the lake.

“If we don’t have a willing seller at the south end, we still plan to build tent and RV camping facilities, day-use and picnic areas, boat ramps, and boat docks within the property we own,” says Baxter. “What I’m anticipating most is construction of

a group-use shelter, which I see being used for family reunions, wedding receptions, and meetings of church groups and civic organizations.”

Baxter also hopes to eventually add rental cottages, a bathhouse, and a shower facility. Currently, FWP is upgrading the existing road, putting in picnic tables and a gravel parking area, and installing a toilet, a boat ramp, and a boat dock.

FWP’s plans for the park extend far beyond the shoreline. The department aims to restore the highlands above the lake’s north and west shores to native prairie. A proposed interpretive trail would detail the area’s geology, human history, and unique natural history, including the diverse prairie birds and plants.

The diverse local people, however, are what most interest Elliott Jensen. He hopes the state park can again make the site a community gathering place.

“Dagmar will celebrate its centennial in 2006. I can’t think of a better birthday present than an old-fashioned community party,” says Jensen. “In the past, Brush Lake was the place for people to get together. I hope it will once again be such a place.” 🐾



## If You Go

**Open:** May 1 through November 30.

**Directions:** From Plentywood, head south on Montana Highway 16 for 16 miles to the Reserve intersection. Head east on Highway 258 (East Reserve Highway) for 16½ miles, then south on Brush Lake County Road for 1 mile.

**Facilities:** Picnic tables, toilet, swimming area, boat ramp, boat dock, interpretive signs.

**Activities:** Swimming, boating, diving, camping, picnicking, wildlife watching, photography, geological study.

**For more information:** Call the FWP regional parks office at Glasgow (406-228-3707) or go on-line to [fwp.mt.gov](http://fwp.mt.gov).

## 2005 STATE PARKS EVENTS CALENDAR

### SEPTEMBER

**1** **Hot Topics: Upper Missouri River Monument,** *Giant Springs State Park, 8 p.m.* Learn why this scenic and wild stretch of the Missouri was designated as a national monument. (406) 727-1212.

**2** **Interpretive Walks,** *Giant Springs State Park, 8 a.m.* Find out what the Missouri River Valley looked like when Lewis and Clark traveled through this area 200 years ago. (406) 727-1212.

**2** **Star Gazing Under the Caverns Sky,** *Lewis & Clark Caverns State Park, 8 p.m.* Telescopes for viewing distant planets and galaxies will be available. (406) 287-3541.

**2, 3** **Interpretation at Rainbow Falls,** *Giant Springs State Park, 1 p.m.* History of the waterfalls at Rainbow Falls Upper Overlook. (406) 727-1212.

**3** **North Shore Interpretive Hikes,** *Giant Springs State Park, 9 a.m.* Learn about native plants, wildlife, and Lewis and Clark history. (406) 727-1212.

**3** **Star Gazing the Bannack Skies,** *Bannack State Park, 9 p.m.* The park will provide telescopes for viewing distant planets and galaxies. (406) 834-3413.

**4** **From Bears to Buffalo: Animals on the Expedition,** *Giant Springs State Park, 1 p.m.* Bring your kids to this fun children’s program on animals found and described during the Lewis and Clark Expedition. (406) 727-1212.

**7** **The Beautiful Blue Heron,** *Giant Springs State Park, 12:15 p.m.* Stories and facts about this stately water bird. (406) 727-1212.

**8–11** **Traditional Trades Week,** *Travelers’ Rest State Park, 10 a.m.*

### SEPTEMBER

## 7

### The Beautiful Blue Heron

*Giant Springs State Park, 12:15 p.m.*

Four feet tall, with a 6-foot wingspan, the great blue is the largest of North America’s 12 heron species. The grand bird is found throughout Montana along streams, rivers, ponds, and reservoirs. **Learn more natural history, lore, and mythology at this midday lecture. Call (406) 727-1212.**



WAYNE STADLER

Demonstrations and hands-on activities of the skills needed to survive in the early 18th century. Reenactments, living history, and interpretive programs. (406) 273-4253.

**17, 18** **5th Annual Atlatl Competition,** *Ulm Pishkun State*

*Park, 10 a.m.* Fling that thing! Have fun learning to throw this 8,000-year-old hunting device. (406) 866-2217.

For more information on parks events, go to [fwp.mt.gov/parks](http://fwp.mt.gov/parks) or call (406) 444-3764.